THE PERISHABLE QUALITY

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Kindly, intelligent, discriminatingly amoral, ageing but still attractive. Eva flees from London and her demanding young lover, Val, to Bylau, the South Wales town of her youth. But she cannot escape memories of her past—of her love for Elwyn, a young miner dying of T.B.; and of 'Mr. Dai', colliery manager and patron of Bylau, whose mistress she became. Her immediate past catches up on her when Val follows her down from London, where life has become too much for her. The bohemian young people of Soho are left behind. The question of what to do about Val remains; but Eva is resourceful. . . .

BOOKS BY

RHYS DAVIES

NOVELS

The Red Hills
A Time to Laugh
Jubilee Blues
Under the Rose
Tomorrow to Fresh Woods
The Black Venus
The Dark Daughters
Marianne
The Painted King
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DESCRIPTIVE

My Wales
The Story of Wales
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THE PERISHABLE QUALITY

A NOVEL BY

RHYS DAVIES

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CHAPTER ONE

DOORS SLAMMED, a whistle blew, but it was not until the train was about to move that she shot out of the waiting-room, gave a rapid glance up and down the platform, ran across it, and bundled herself into a first-class compartment. She carried a large suitcase, and a near-by porter stared at the well-dressed woman curiously as she huddled in her corner; clearly she was in an emotional condition. She gave a furtive last scrutiny of the retreating platform. An agile late-comer still could have jumped on the train.

In the noon light of a perfect May day London looked rid of its atmospheric blights—the time of the year when she most enjoyed living there. Tears threatened as, beyond the great station, she looked out at the back garden lilacs, laburnum chains, drying men's shirts and table-cloths, birdcotes, anonymous bedroom windows. At one time London had meant liberation to her. It was something else now. She shivered and turned from the window, dimly aware of the two other passengers in the compartment. But now that she was safely in the train, accomplishing the journey she had threatened herself with for several weeks, a sense of proportion began to assert itself. This flight surely was overemphatic? And did flight ever really solve a problem?

A waiter came round announcing luncheon. She became aware of exhaustion and remembered that she had eaten no food since seven o'clock last night. She took a ticket for luncheon. At a sudden thought her face stiffened and, rising with startling rapidity, she hastened into the corridor and walked the entire length of the half-empty train, peering cautiously into each compartment. It was not impossible . . . she might find a hand gripping her wrist as she lifted a spoonful of soup to her mouth.

Seated secure in the dining-car, again she admonished herself, this rational self having ordered sherry. A ridiculous state to get into! She thought further: 'But you've made a sensible move at last, you're doing the proper thing. Give yourself at least three months, and don't budge . . .' She looked so thunderously at the man lowering himself into the seat opposite her at the table that he himself started, it seemed belligerently, and asked: "Is this seat engaged?" He could have sat alone at one of the many empty tables.

"What?" she stammered. "What?" Recovering, she shook her head, smiled vividly if automatically, and sipped the sherry, which tasted of sooty vinegar.

The man glanced warily at the withdrawn eyes, the miraculous skin with its inner rich glow, the full, turbulent, expertly painted lips, and he slowly expanded in the chair. It was a table for two, and he sociably remarked that very few passengers were taking advantage of the luncheon service.

"What did you say?" It was demanded in a tone that made him adjust his heavy horn glasses. He looked a prosperous manufacturer of some useful

household necessity. He had seen her peering, obsessive and alert, into his compartment.

She ate her soup as though achieving the act inside a block of ice. The man did not give up. Those expanding, hairy, gross nostrils! The old curse, her doom, was still functioning; she was offended at the realisation, as a sick person can be offended by the fact that vigorously normal life is proceeding around. The man was looking at her with a mixture of benevolence, recognition of his inherent rights as a successful male, and patronage. Expanding again, steak pie on his plate and a second lager in his glass, he remarked: "I make this journey every week since we opened a factory in South Wales, and it's surprising how few take lunch on this train."

"Is it surprising?"

He looked down his nose in florid disturbance. She gazed at him with a look of reproach that somehow seemed directed more at herself, a remote disgust in her face. She might have been seated in some uneasy throne of detachment from which she stared down in nausea at both this man and a projection of herself. An expression of despair followed this. Her soft pretty hands fell to her lap; she seemed about to get up to leave. He offered her the salt; fish was on her plate. The idle waiters hovered, concerned; she told one of them it wasn't the fish, but he suggested a slice of cold ham and salad. Her eyeballs began to burn.

'Oh God,' she groaned to herself. God, it was coming again.

The intolerable pain. A viciously alien torment filling every cranny and gripping every attribute, a

physical sensation in which she floated flaccid but trembling. From a distance she heard the man say: "Now, that's a beautiful dish of radish. They always produce big bowls of fresh radish on this line. One must give them credit for that." The waiter, platter in hand, asked her something about cheese. She heard herself speak, found cheese on her plate.

"Give the dog its due," her table companion proceeded a step further in affability, "they provide a substantial lunch even if the cooking is rough and ready." She smiled, looked at her watch, stared into the bowl of glistening radish. The evil flood within her thickened.

At the same time she nodded again at the man opposite, said a normal "No, thank you" to the offer of a cigarette. He gave up at last.

The bout lasted for most of the four-hour journey. Almost she contemplated getting out at the first stop and taking the next train back to London. Why struggle? What use was flight? Yet she knew there was wisdom in the flight. Quiet awaited her. The thing possessing her belonged to a certain milieu and a certain arrangement of circumstances; change them and surely the thing would lose most of its power? Besides, she was physically and mentally exhausted. She needed sleep, conventional simplicity, the calm order of traditional domesticity.

By the time she had left the train at the big bustling junction, the bout had retreated. She sniffed the seaport air. This was another country, where she was—or had been?—native. Some of the flavour of her past years returned to her; the identity of that amiable and happy girl freshened

and somewhat healed her. Waiting in a brassy refreshment room for the connecting train, a school mug of punishment-tasting tea in her hand, the melancholy that came to her was not displeasing.

This worn mellowness lasted for the further journey of twenty miles, up towards the hills. The interior landscape darkened, gradually became less pastoral; the train was approaching a historic industrial area. She got out at a small town which smelled of rough hills, a sharp, invigorating tang belonging to her youth; it further eased her. Among other passengers on the station bridge a woman peered at her and, in the bright high tones of the district, exclaimed: "Why, if it isn't Eva Pritchard! Come to see your sister, have you?"

Eva smiled, rather like royalty welcoming a total stranger as a familiar. "I've come to stay a long while," she replied, trying to connect this respectably-dressed contemporary with the bygone years.

"You haven't changed a scrap, Eva! You look so *well*; and so young! I was saying to Maud Evans not long ago—you remember Maudie, that married the auctioneer who was sweet on you?—I wonder, I said, what has become of Eva Pritchard? Wouldn't be surprised if she had married a duke. Ha, ha."

There was a waltz in this woman's voice. She was stimulated by this meeting, and admiring, if a little cautious; she treated the visitor with the respect in which, with a few marked exceptions, Eva was held by natives of the district. "A duke?" Eva said, parting from the woman in the booking hall. "Not even a dustman. I'm an old maid."

This caused deep, though not vocally expressed, mirth; delighted, the woman hopped away. For a

few moments Eva paused in the grubby, unchanged booking hall. The sweet melancholy of the past still haunted her. From this railway station she had set out into the world with a corded trunk . . . how many years ago? It occurred to her, as she handed the suitcase to an importuning urchin, that she was returning rather plainly. No time to buy even a box of chocolates for Linda, or cigarettes for Philip. . . . Of course there had been time! But it would have been rather like buying chocolates whilst planning suicide.

The strong-legged mountain boy—except by complicated arrangement one couldn't get a cab in this place—trotting before her, she walked down a crowded main street of shops. People gazed inquisitively at the expensively-dressed stranger; one or two, after a surprised pause, half attempted to greet her. She walked on fixedly, not seeing, disciplined for this. After turning up a well-behaved road of semi-detached houses she and the boy reached a big green patch of common-land where benches and thorn bushes, together with a never-used bandstand, gave a promise of rural repose: views of the town, the river below, and the foothills where the great valley opened, could be obtained. Down beyond the far side of the common, in a rough dell, a square stone house stood isolated. Lazy smoke came from one of its chimneys.

She felt like a marooned castaway seeing an approaching ship. Tears welled up.

The only house in the dell, and one of the original dwellings remaining from the pre-industrial era, its situation was inconvenient. Built at the end of the eighteenth century, it had a

plain, unobtrusive distinction, flat-fronted, secure in a large throw of walled garden. She opened the gate and walked up the ochre bricked path between borders of pansies, wallflowers and grape hyacinths. The boy was given half a crown, looked overcome, and, a little overcome herself, she gave a peremptory bang on the iron door-knocker. She was not expected. But she owned the house.

When the door opened the woman within stared hard for a moment, before uttering a cry of mingled consternation and pleasure. "Eva!" she cried, gave a frightened step backwards, and ran forward in her flowered kitchen overall to embrace her sister. "Isn't this extraordinary," she exclaimed, still not without consternation, "I'm just making pikelets for tea, and I haven't made them for weeks! I must have *felt* you were on the way."

"I had no time to wire or phone you." The cool, shadowy hall smelt of regularly polished dark wood and a bowl of golden and claret wallflowers. Eva sat down. with a faintly collapsing descent, on a hard chair beside a serenely ticking grandfather clock.

"Anything the matter——?" Linda darted, whipping off the overall with battling rapidity.

"Oh no . . . no. I just felt I had to come. I'm rather off-colour, though."

"Ah!" Linda looked hard at her. Except for colds, Eva had never suffered any blights. Her abundance of health, indeed, partook of a monstrous moral injustice.

Eva glanced around, handbag on knees like a caller. "You've got a new rug. It's not . . . in keeping," she frowned; "it's Cockney."

"It's cheerful." Linda's voice held the virtue of both a wife and a reputable subscriber to convention. "Now, come and have tea, Eva, and tell me all about it."

"I've come just for a visit," Eva said, to her own surprise. "Perhaps a long one," she amended. "I don't like that pot there, either." She scowled towards the wallflowers. "There's nothing to tell."

"*Pot!* It's a bowl."

"It's silly pottery. Go and get tea. I'll run upstairs." She rose—without suggesting the wherewithal to run anywhere—and slipped off her light cashmere coat, throwing it carelessly on the chair. Linda glanced at the coat with assessing admiration. Eva said: "You can have it; I bought it a fortnight ago." Bought, she remembered, in an attempt to attain compensation no longer effective.

"It's rather showy for me here."

"Showy!" Eva exploded. "Don't be so idiotic, Linda. You don't feel safe unless you look like a tea-cosy, though your figure can carry clothes better than mine." Linda, perhaps in sisterly penance, always chose clothes at which no local finger could be pointed.

"I don't think Philip would let me wear it," Linda said, fingering the material lovingly.

Eva, on the staircase, gave a snort. Later, over tea, which they took in the kitchen with the buttermoist pikelets fresh from the bakestone, she composedly evaded Linda's reconnoitring sallies. The faint azure bruises on her neck were due, she said, to a tight collar of gold shells she had worn to a theatre. It was certainly true that her flesh bruised easily. After tea, whilst Linda prepared for the

evening meal, she made an inspecting tour of the house. After a minute or two she reappeared thunderous at the kitchen door.

"What have you done with the portrait of Mr. Dai?"

Linda gave a jump away from a pile of young carrots. "Oh, I forgot to tell you!" She had reddened. "It fell down; the hook or something. So I put it in the box-room until . . . Besides, I've meant to redecorate the sitting-room."

"Liar." Eva spoke with deliberation. "I believe that picture only goes up in the sitting-room when you know I'm due here, and as soon as I'm gone it's down again. Linda, I'm ashamed of you."

Linda scurried, gaining enough strength not to issue a denial. "Philip has a lot of new people from the laboratories visiting us, and they ask who the portrait is of . . . I don't like the picture hanging there. Eva, it makes me feel awkward, answering questions."

"Awkward!" Eva's scorn gave her an aspect of virtue before which her sister, unquestionably more entitled to that quality, quailed. "You hypocrite, Linda, you nasty hypocrite. . . . It's going back this minute, and if anyone asks *me* those questions I'll tell them it's a painting of the best man that ever trod these damned hills." With this exit line she swept away, and had become mistress of the house again.

After noisily tramping up to the box-room she carried the heavy-framed painting down, fetched a pair of steps from an outhouse, demanded a hook of her nervously frowning sister, and hung the picture in the honoured place over the marble mantelpiece.

It was a painting, in lugubrious oils, of no special merit, depicting a man in the prime of life. His aspect was forceful to the point of aggressiveness; he looked an old-style employer of men who would brook no nonsense and who could be kind and fatherly as well as pig-headed. He wore a cap such as the ordinary miners of his day wore and he stood proudly against a distant background of pit-stacks, slag-heap, coal-wagons, and a sultrily vehement sky. The whole effect was as darkly colourful as Mr. Dai's period; this was the painting's only artistic merit. It was the sort of conventional portrait that years after the death of its subject might be carried one spring-cleaning day to an attic and forgotten.

Half an hour later Linda found her sister weeping on a stool under the painting, her head lifted as though helplessly exposing her face to blows. The tears poured down those cheeks whose skin had so shamelessly retained the lustre of young fruit. Her eyes, shunning Linda's presence, seemed to be asking for comfort from Mr. Dai as from a father.

"What *is* the matter?" Exasperation was only half-way out of Linda's voice. More than once in the past, when aggrieved beyond endurance, she had taunted her emotional sister: "Eva, you ought to be on the stage." Eva did not reply now, and she observed: "No one would think you were your age."

"I've begun to realise it lately," Eva wept.

Linda cocked a cold eye at the painting, which hung slightly askew. She sat down, as though only for a moment, and regarded her sister judiciously, waiting for this lachrymose display to pass. Duti-

fully and objectively fond of Eva, she felt obliged to give credit where credit was due. How Eva (with reservations, of course) had got on! Often she could talk like a lady. A lady who had not only mixed with the best but had brooded on life off her own bat and acquired poise thereby. How different she was now from the rude ignorant girl of the old days! (Lack of brains apart, the poor thing never had the chance even to matriculate.) It was not only a matter of the best clothes and those well-preserved looks; she had taken the best advantage of her adventures and never let herself down.

"Like a glass of something, Eva?"

"You know I don't drink when it's not necessary."

"Well, everything is there in the cabinet. Philip keeps it for the visitors from the laboratories. You haven't hung the picture straight, Eva." She got up and straightened it. "After all these years it ought to be cleaned. . . . What *is* wrong with you?" she repeated.

Eva's tears had ceased. "Nothing . . . nothing. Only nerves."

"Nerves!" They might have been bunions. "Have you been losing money or worrying over something?"

"I've *made* money. Jimmy Brooks told me about some copper shares——"

"You're still seeing *him*?" Linda exclaimed, recalling the name over the years.

"He lost a leg in the war," Eva said irrelevantly. "I was sitting in St. James's Park reading a book last September and saw him feeding the ducks from a paper bag. He'd been having tea in the House of Commons. We cried together."

"Are you doing a lot of that now, Eva?"

"He was very upset, seeing me again after so many years. I never knew about the leg. A naval commander—only a war one, of course; he's got a decoration, and two grown-up sons married and with children——" She lapsed into reverie, looking out of the window where the dwindling valley sunshine had turned to the green of grapes.

"You've kept on seeing him since September?" Linda asked, on the track. "Him a grandfather with grown-up sons married?" She punched a cushion into shape.

Eva turned again to the portrait. About the set of her neck and head was a forbidding dignity Linda knew well; it was a quality often assumed in public. "Never take that picture down again, Linda."

"I wonder Mr. Dai didn't get you done, to match it," Linda remarked, picking an escaped feather from the faded carpet of old yellow.

"It was his wife got the portrait done," Eva replied composedly. "Can't you sit down? How is Llewellyn?"

They talked of Linda's son, a student at the university college on the west coast, kept comfortably there by virtue of his aunt's aid: Eva was devoted to her nephew, an agreeable youth who was supposed to resemble her facially. At half-past six Linda's husband arrived.

Philip had an irritating habit of thinking it necessary to adopt a flirtatious manner with her, as though she expected this homage from all men. Good-natured, a former Rugby player, he looked

life in the eye like a butcher assessing a carcass, hale cheeks clinging toughly to a pugnacious nose. He had wanted to be a physician and, in his rare moping moods, blamed the war (which he had enjoyed) and an early marriage for frustrating this. He was now manager of one of the laboratories a firm of manufacturing chemists had opened in the new 'garden' factory estate on the outskirts of the town.

"You don't change a scrap, Philip," Eva said, looking at him across the dining table.

"You're just the same yourself, Eva. Fresh as a daisy and full of beans." It sounded rhetorical.

Linda said: "When I opened the door to her I thought she had come down with bad news too bad to be said in a letter or on the phone. 'She's lost all her money,' I said to myself, 'on the Stock Exchange . . . or on something else.' "

"Eva's always got a home here," Philip said stoutly. "It's not horses, is it, Eva?"

Linda offered her another lamb cutlet. "Could you face settling here again, dear?"

"It had not occurred to me the time had come," Eva reassured her.

Philip looked at his watch. "What about a film tonight?"

"Of course Eva doesn't want to go to the pictures after her long journey. Our cinema here, too!"

"I would like to go." Linda stared at her, but Eva was looking, strangely, at the apparently unconcerned Philip.

The succession of films she had seen lately! They exercised a fairly reliable amnesia; she slept better after them. Sitting next to Philip in the local

dolled-up shed, the injection automatically did its work. Philip kept up his gallantry in the car going home. Like many coarse-grained men he could—when alerted—be particularly sensitive to women's moods, without being able to offer any but the most elementary remedies.

"Our Eva," he called jovially to the back of the car, "needs a new sweetheart. Don't you, Eva? What about coming to the social at our labs. next week with Linda? Since we opened the extension we've got a lot of new chaps down from all over the country. I know one, a brilliant chemist, who is just your cup of tea: serious and good-looking. All the girls in the labs. are mad about him."

"Oh, be quiet, Philip," Linda protested, sensitive from another plane.

Eva sat looking out into the lumpy streets. It had begun to rain. Gas lamps streamed in the familiar valley downpour like weeping faces. The small mountain town, tightly enclosed in the night, had a look of all activities contracted into a humdrum routine governed by jobs and sober necessity. Even the rain fell at fixed intervals. She became aware of how loose and disorganised her life was; it was a smudge, lacked design, focus, even meaning.

"Of course, dear," Linda said, as her husband put the car away in a shanty built beyond the garden, "Philip is very fond of you and still thinks of you as —well, gay. For him, all you ask of life is a good time."

"That demand is understandable enough," Eva said, off-hand.

Linda paused at the door in the swaying rain, apparently to sniff the drenched white and pink

stocks below the windows. "What *is* the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm getting wet. Open the door."

"The fact is," Linda remarked, fumbling unhurriedly in her bag for her key, and crystallising with the simplicity of an uncomplicated person, "you really have lived only for pleasure." She turned the key and walked into her orderly home with a confident air.

"And now I'm paying the penalty?"

"I've never seen you in this state," Linda challenged in turn, switching on the light. "Some milk and biscuits?"

"I'm going up to bed straight away. Say goodnight to Philip for me."

Below the staircase Linda's neat, triangular face stared up at her concernedly. She was six years younger than Eva, for whom her admiring regard, though abridged by notions assimilated from a respect for all that makes a nation sound, would never die. Eva had brought spectacle and a smashing of threadbare safety to the family: she might also have ruined it. Linda always loyally searched to distinguish a creditable pattern in her sister's life but, despite the material success, had not found it so far. Her highest defensive judgment (to Philip) had been: "Eva is so generous, so soft-hearted; she really wants to love the whole world."

The errant one looked down over the banister at the trim figure below. "There's nothing to worry about, my darling. My body is still sound as a bell —and as my bank balance. The trouble is only . . . I suppose penalty is the word. I want to rest and hide."

"From a man?"

"Well, not the police." Eva laughed, mounting the stairs. "Except, perhaps, the police we all carry about with us."

"What time do you want breakfast?" Linda called pleadingly, not wanting her to go, not liking that laugh.

"Nine. In bed. Dry toast only."

"You used to eat a good breakfast, Eva."

"I used to need it," Eva replied from the top of the staircase, making Linda drop her eyes.

The next morning, after a surprisingly deep and sound sleep, she went out. First she picked a bunch of flowers from the garden, myosotis, pansies, sweet-williams and such-like, tying them with string to which she attached a piece of notepaper inscribed 'Love from Eva'. Linda watched her in wordless criticism. But a lot of the previous night's apathy seemed to have left her sister.

At the front door Eva turned and said: "If anyone should come asking for me, say I'm not here . . . say I've gone on to friends in Cardiganshire."

"Who should call for you?" Linda demanded, astonished.

"Perhaps the Archangel Gabriel."

"Lunch will be ready at one, Eva."

"Don't wait for me." Eva stepped out into a clear bleached morning. "Did you say the trams don't go there any more?"

"Yes; it's buses now. They start from the Square. I'm making a meringue pie for you." Linda went a few disturbed steps after her down the brick path. "You don't really need that coat. It's going to be warm."

"I've said you can have it. It cost forty-five

pounds. No one is likely to notice me this morning."

"Everybody sees you, Eva. You can't be missed. . . . Even people who don't know you wonder who you are," she added hurriedly.

"You make me feel I don't belong here any more. Me! I laid the foundation stone of the Institute."

"*One* of the foundation stones." Linda had flushed. That little scandal had reached even her young ears. During the night following the laying of these foundation panels, some person, probably one of the fanatical rebels of the period, had chalked an epithet above Eva's name carved on the stone.

A quarter of an hour later Eva passed the Institute, situated in a quiet road leading into the Square. The names on the eight panels—they flanked both sides of the forbidding portico—had become blurred in the hard local winters. Inside the building were thoughtful efforts to wean the local workers from turbulence: a billiard saloon, reading room, skittles alley, a spinach-green hall for smoking concerts. She remembered the opening ceremony: a thunderstorm of extreme violence had tumbled on the town and in the ensuing deluge, whilst Mr. Dai was giving his speech, the basement was flooded. Delighted political malcontents had said the whole edifice was shoddy, and certain religious characters found the thunderstorm a deliberate act from above.

As she waited in the Square for the bus, posy in hand, she did not notice the inquisitive glances or open stares from passers-by. She stood dreaming. Northwards, the long valley opened bluely, in its

bed the contaminated river bumping a raw way among clutters of slag heaps and blackened boulders. She knew it all so well, changed though the valley and the town at its mouth was. She felt she was there in search of a lost identity, of a self that had known happy security.

She smiled to herself. Security, indeed! That gross lump of a girl! A pig is secure in its sty. She got on the bus, welcomed by a young conductor who, perhaps because it was a fine morning, was singing an aria from *Rigoletto*. The bus sprang lustily through the Square. The only other passengers inside were a sweet-eating child of seven in charge of an old, old man with a face in which debris acquired a racial nobility. "Bryn Hyfryd," she murmured to the singing conductor, tendering a coin.

"Lovely flowers!" he observed, apparently sniffing the bunch through alive nostrils. "Grow them yourself?" Not yet recalled to her old native self, she did not reply to this challenge, only smiled abstractedly. The young man, punching her ticket, persisted: "My granny is in Bryn Hyfryd. I was up there Palm Sunday. Nice, up there."

"The air is clean," she said weakly, still without her old bearings.

This delighted him; he guffawed. "The council's taking the lamp-posts up there soon. That'll spoil the comforts at night." This esoteric information meant nothing to her until she remembered that even in her day Bryn Hyfryd had been a traditional courting domain after dark. She smiled, liking this conductor and his pure tenor voice if not his guffaw. "Come to think of it," he said, even more mysteri-

ously, "they mix well." And, not encouraged, he leapt to the upper deck amid a renewed shower of *Rigoletto.*

After climbing among newly built pairs of houses the bus stopped outside the cemetery gates. The conductor, perhaps judging her a recently bereaved woman, ceremoniously helped her to alight. "Now, don't stop too long there!" he smiled, and for a moment the affability in his eye became a familiar glint. The spell was still active.

Surrounded by remnants of arboreal lanes in which couples were wont to seek a solitude denied them in the bed of the valley, the cemetery lay cut into the hillside like two pages of a music-score. She walked up the main avenue between neat rows of white and black stones. Half-way up, the avenue was broken by a circular halt where a powerful column of black marble stood on a heavy plinth. It was the centre-piece of the cemetery. Four benches were placed against the yew hedges surrounding this costly tomb. Arrived there, Eva saw that Mr. Dai had not been forgotten on Palm Sunday although he had no legal descendants left in Bylau. Several people must have made the pilgrimage to his tomb; withered bunches of flowers, mostly tulips and daffodils, were strewn on the plinth. Before laying her own bunch she sat on a bench, panting a little from the steep climb, and also from automatic emotion.

On Palm Sunday the people remember the dead. The cemetery is filled with flowers. Wandering among the blaze, the pilgrims pause and read, on stained plain slab or under feet of weathered angel, the name of some acquaintance and remind their

friends of at least one incident the name recalls: in Bylau, as elsewhere, there are few who die without achieving some deed that separates man from fowl, beast and fish and earns him the name of human. It is a day of whispered biographies. On the benches surrounding this black marble, where dark fires still flickered in the stone's sunlit depths, many people must have sat recalling Mr. Dai. Probably her own name had been mentioned more than once.

She had not herself visited here for many years. Sitting pondering in that neutral silence of a cemetery, she wondered why she had come now. She had never been able to decide whether her devotion to Mr. Dai's memory was an admirable quality or not. Socially, of course, it was not admirable. Had he 'ruined' her life? The reply could be "Yes." But she had chosen that ruin—if such it was. The unfortunate element in it all was that she had been ruined at a period when the Scarlet Woman was in the plenitude of one of her recognisable reigns. Nowadays this legendary being was reduced in stature, and indeed had become a bit of a bore; she was more acceptable socially, but as unfashionable as excessive virtue. There were different thorns in the body of the world now.

Had it all been fun? She had thought so at one time, but now she wasn't so sure. The one certainty was that she hadn't been treated shabbily by Mr. Dai—far from it. She sat there musing in the bright morning, idle and without material anxieties, a visitor to the dust of the man who had ruined her, flowers from the garden of one of his homes in her hand, and doubt in her heart. Why had she come there? What was the point? Suddenly she got up

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and walked away into a path leading off the main avenue.

After a long search among the rows of simple graves in this section, she found the stone. The grave was neglected and weedy, the lettering faint on the plain grey stone. A man aged twenty-three lay buried there. She laid the bunch of flowers against the stone, stood for a minute with bent head, and walked away. She knew then that she had never really forgotten him. He was alive again, and yesterday it was from him she had fled.

CHAPTER TWO

IN THOSE DAYS life was more private. Each little town minded its own business and if people travelled it was usually on some necessary errand and not just to poke their noses into the world in idle curiosity. Bylau, one of several small mining towns in the neighbourhood, thrived under Mr. Dai's overseership. Of course Bylau had its economic troubles, but they were not to be compared with the bitter strife in other districts farther up the great valley. Mr. Dai, sole and undisputed leader of Bylau right up to the time when he passed out on top C, knew how to handle his men: also the women. In tribal days he would have been chosen king.

A short, broad-beamed man, but agile in his movements, the bombast of his bearing was nicely curtailed by a melodiously good voice and a direct acceptance of all persons as his golden-brown eyes saw them and not as their records of misdemeanours or virtues informed. He nearly always wore a tweed cap, like any collier, even at his dinner-table (except when a chapel minister was present). His hands and feet were briskly small and he wore dark flannel shirts winter and summer. Eva always remembered him as she first saw him, and for her he had never changed.

At the age of seventeen she had thought she

owned a voice. A necessity to burst into song at any hour of the day misled her. These explosions were only a need to vent her natural exuberance: she always wanted to give herself out. Yet, in a way, her voice had been her fortune.

"I know what we'll do," her mother said, spitting on the flat iron before attacking Mrs. Griffiths's washing, "I'll take you up to see Mr. Dai. He paid for Merlin Williams to go to a college in London. Perhaps he'll take a fancy to you, too. Now you've put your hair up you don't look too bad." Her real attention was on the basket of ironing, which earned her half a crown. "You've got beautiful hair," she added morosely.

"It's breasts singers have, not hair," Eva said.

Already her own had declared their vigour; but she felt them straining in curbed ambition, there in enclosed Bylau, with poor Mam working extra hard since Dad had been killed in the pit, the compensation money, of course, being not enough to live on. People said she was a beauty, too, but she had no conceited views about this herself, genially accepting the facts of her existence, of which her appearance was an undisputable part. Everybody in their street liked her and showed pleasure at her approach, and everybody said she ought to be a singer. They meant really that she ought to be on a platform of some kind, displaying herself. There was a lustre about her.

One June evening, at six o'clock, her mother took her up to Nantcellan, the large new house built in full view of the main colliery—there were two others not far up the valley—of which Mr. Dai was General Manager. They climbed through the pack

of streets in their best clothes, Eva in new buttoned-over shoes which began to squeak in Vavasour Terrace, incommoding her mother, though Eva giggled.

"Cross Mr. Dai's room on your toes," Mam said.

"Is it true that his wife was a suffragette?" Eva asked. A gaunt old woman stopped them to gossip, and when her mother said importantly that they were on their way to see Mr. Dai she suddenly became aware that her future was in jeopardy: her chest began to feel older and older. Probably she would begin in the Nantcellan kitchen, from which several girls had graduated into quick marriage with miners; Mr. Dai's wedding present to them was well-known and always the same—a piano, the make and cost never varying.

"I don't know what Mrs. Dai Pryce is," her mother had replied, "except that she's well off and she isn't a mother."

"They say she doesn't eat meat either. Only vegetables."

Nantcellan had four chimneys, big bay windows, a conservatory, a pond in the garden, and a torpid bulldog that came dribbling towards them from under rhododendron bushes. The dog was accustomed to six o'clock callers. No person had ever gone away from Mr. Dai's door unnourished. He gave away advice and references, chickens from his Carmarthen farm, rolls of country flannel, trusses and spectacles, and money. It was said that he had hordes of children in Bylau and elsewhere, but whether this was meant in the physical or spiritual sense was left obscure: he was such a general father to everybody. Six o'clock was his

opening time for receiving callers, and exactly six o'clock it was when Mrs. Pritchard rang the bell under an iron basket of geraniums in the porch: she wanted to be first. One evening that week, she had heard, there had been callers for advice about a legacy in a will, a summons concerning a bastard, the best treatment for shingles, and a deputation to invite Mr. Dai to adjudicate at a boxing tournament.

A maidservant, pretty and chaste-looking in white cap and apron but still recognisable as May Lewis, daughter of the engineman who lived in Coronation Terrace, admitted them. Mrs. Pritchard carefully ignored awareness of her identity. "Mr. David Pryce is home, is he?" she asked, forbiddingly giving Mr. Dai his full name.

"Hello, May," Eva said. "How do you like it here?"

"It's Windsor Castle," May replied. "A hot meal every night, and you can weigh yourself on *that* every day." In the hall she pointed to a weighing machine at the foot of the staircase.

Mrs. Pritchard looked surprised by the plainness of the spacious hall; as she said afterwards, there might have been sawdust on the floor as in Dr. Watkins's waiting-room. A dog's kennel stood jutting out of a cavernous fireplace. On a table lay a huge, dulled lump of coal, cut when the first Bylau pit shaft was sunk in 1870 and the prospectors found they had struck lucky. Over the fireplace hung an engraving of Vavasour Beddoes, pioneer and original owner of the Bylau mining properties: he looked anæmic and effeminate, as though more addicted to playing the harpsichord than digging

for coal. May knocked in a trained way at a door at the back of the hall; she also gave an affected little cough before vanishing into the room.

"Come this way if you please," she said, returning primly. She winked at Eva as she went past behind her mother into the room.

Mr. Dai sat busy-looking at a desk covered with papers and folders. A piano, sofa and plush chairs gave evidence that all was not labour in this back room which somehow smelt grittily of the pit-head. Mr. Dai wore his working cap as usual, the peak sideways this evening, and rose to greet his visitors.

"Mrs. Pritchard. Let me see, now"—and he remembered almost at once—"you were married to Ellis Pritchard that was killed in the fall in Number Two pit four years ago?" He looked guilty and worried, as though responsible for the fall of roof.

"You came to tell me about it," Mrs. Pritchard said, "and you came to Ellis's funeral too. This is my daughter: Eva Sharon Ann." The recital of all her names made their owner look down at her feet. "One more daughter I have: Linda Mary. And a boy I had, Llewellyn Idris, that died of diphtheria in the epidemic; you sent a lovely wreath." Her daughter looked up and saw her mother's face as briefly she sometimes saw it—patient, hard, and not belonging to anyone but her own inside self.

"I remember. It was bad for you. Two men lost, eh? Never mind, my girl. You must think of what you've still got." Mr. Dai pushed some papers away with a gesture that was not weary but seemed to hold a sigh. He had given Eva a quick look as she sat sedate, but ready not to be.

"I've come about my daughter," Mrs. Pritchard said, in a tone not yet released from disaster.

Giving Eva a second look, keen and overall this time, he said, more heartily now: "I can't see there's anything the matter with her at all." Eva, detecting the praise, looked up again and smiled with acknowledging modesty. "A bunch of cherries!" Mr. Dai said. Mrs. Pritchard looked about her in astonishment as if a bowl of the fruit, not yet in season, was being offered. "Well, what's the matter with her?" Mr. Dai demanded, stretching his legs comfortably under the desk.

"Itching she is to be a singer," Mrs. Pritchard hastily explained. "They say she can sing."

"Who says?"

"Two or three of them in Moriah chapel, and she's always bursting into it soon as she gets up. The mistress in school, Miss Coles, gave her marks."

He was darting quicker glances at Eva. He had been the means, together with benefit concerts, of shooting several local youngsters out of Bylau for training if they showed remarkable promise. But those had been boys and, except for Merlin Williams, now singing in London opera, they had to do with the scholastic and mining professions. He organised the details of their exits. Eva knew all this by hearsay and she was ready to go out into the world at his or anybody else's behest. As she sat there, waiting for direction, she was aware of the kindling interest in Mr. Dai. She liked him. He reminded her of her father but was without her father's gay roaring. Feeling that she was being observed and talked about too long without herself

talking, she shook her head, spread her hands and looked at them with admiration.

"I'm not sure that I can sing," she suddenly declared, diving into a pause between the elders. "Perhaps I am only an actress."

"An actress!" her mother breathed, staring at her as if she had just broken a leg.

Mr. Dai chuckled. He got up, quite briskly, and crossed to the piano. "Well," he said in a cheerful way as if he was ten years younger, "sing to me now. What do you know? *The Ash Grove*? *The Ripening Wheat*? Come on, my gal."

She rose readily and went over to the piano, shoes squeaking. *"The Ripening Wheat,"* she decided. "I like sad songs best."

He struck the keys like a camel and she sang the old air with equal strength, putting her head up to the manner born, hands clasped under her chest. "I don't know if you've got a true voice or not," he said when they had finished. "Sometimes they sound good at your age because they're happy. I better get Noah Morgans to hear you. Ever heard me sing?"

"No, Mr. Dai. People say you can touch the top C."

"Not after a long day's work at the pits, my gal. I was up at five this morning. But I'll try for you and your mother." And he went into *Y Deryn Pur*, the song about the pure bird, and he managed the top C, though not without his neck swelling into purple and the veins beating. He seemed suddenly to be enjoying himself, and asked her to sing again. She stood beside him with damp nose and at-home bearing, dilated by his interest and feeling twice

her size. She remembered wondering if he wore his cap in bed. Across the room her mother waited in silent abeyance, matters taken out of her hands. They accomplished yet another song. May Lewis knocked and came in.

"Men from the Bylau Brass Band are here now, sir," she said, staring; "about their uniforms."

"I'll get Noah Morgans to vet you," Mr. Dai promised. "Off with you now."

It all started as ordinarily as that. Within a week Mr. Noah Morgans, A.R.C.M., who had been everywhere in England and now was retired in great relief to his melodious if dirty birthplace, listened to her in his house opposite the coke-ovens. He said: "No, you haven't got a true voice. There's hundreds as good as you in this valley and you only sing because it's in your nature to make yourself felt just now. You better get married. You're not disappointed, are you?"

"No," Eva said, enjoying even this bit of fuss over herself. "But I want to do something."

"There's nursing and school-teaching and service."

"It's my appearance." She spoke with suitable modesty. "Can't I go on the stage and dance? I want to earn money for my mother and to send my sister to train for a school-teacher. I haven't got brains."

"Well, you can't sing either. Go home now." He treated her as though there was nothing in her but the vanity of youth, and she plumply accepted his opinion.

At home, her mother, cutting bread and butter on the half of the kitchen table laid for early supper, said: "You must go into service. I'll ask Mr. Dai

if he can find a place for you. Or perhaps he can put you on his farm in Carmarthen."

"A milkmaid!" And at once, sitting on a three-legged stool by the fireplace, Eva gave a milking performance, crooning so lovingly to the cow that wasn't there that Linda, sitting at the other half of the table with her school homework, shrieked.

"Or you'll have to get married," her mother said, melancholy.

"Not in Bylau!" Jumping up, Eva glared at the back door, hands on hips, chest bridling. "You big black goat," she stormed, "what time is this to come home? Soaking yourself in the Glyndwr Arms, you stinking tom cat, spending the money that's owing to Bowen the Shop! Why did I marry you?—get out of my sight, coming here in your pit-dirt at seven o'clock expecting steak and green peas hot for you. I'll steak and peas you!" She advanced with fist raised, in manner exactly like Mrs. Powell who lived in the corner house and whose rows with her husband were of fame.

"All husbands are not like that," her mother said spiritlessly, while Linda squealed in instinctive recognition of much marital behaviour. "I pity the one that gets you."

Wheedling and devoted, a young wife sweating with enormous love, Eva crooned: "There, there now, little Thomas bach, have you got cramp, then? Sititng in a cold place in the pit you've been, dear little cockerel? Let me poultice you, *cariad,* let your nice little hen put her wings over you. *Cluck, cluck, cluck,* there now, let me smother you to sleep."

"It's Mrs. Thomas Number Four!" shrieked Linda.

"You mustn't make fun of the neighbours," her mother frowned. "If Mr. Dai can't place you," she worried, "I'll ask Miss Eynon if she can apprentice you in her shop. Even you can sell a packet of pins or a thimble." Miss Eynon was a tartar and often rapped her girls over the knuckles with her yard-stick.

After the supper of delicious penny faggots, bought from the widow of another pit casualty, living in Number 13, Eva went out, singing to herself. The blue back lane smelt of lilac and dung. Ghostly old sheep, come down from the hills to forage, ambled for evening treasures thrown out from back doors. They took no notice of her; the noise of their jaws crunching potato peeling and cabbage stalks sounded peaceable. Something shone on the ground and she found a silver coat button. Big polished stars swung so low, they seemed to want to announce messages from other worlds like Lizzie Bevan, the Spiritualist. She sped down the long lane running between the parallel rows of houses, and turned up into the main road. Pleasure glowed in her chest. She would like to die for somebody. Or have Mrs. Molly Howells's operation for her.

At the main street corner a young man left a group of them lounging in penniless mid-week brooding; he sauntered over to her as she took the opposite direction. "Where are you off to, Eva?" he asked.

"Mrs. Howells." Mrs. Howells, a gossip, always welcomed anybody in her house and was leaving for hospital in a day or two.

"Who's that?" Elwyn asked.

"She's going to have a breast taken away."

"H'm," he said dubiously. "Come for a walk with me instead?"

The skin of his pale and delicate face looked faintly blue in the lamplight. Slender and ascetic-faced, anyone less like a miner couldn't be imagined, outwardly. She had walked a couple of times with him before, but formally and pointlessly. "All right," she said, and they proceeded together, followed by a whistle from the watchful coven of male bats on the corner.

"I often wait at the corner for you to come out." His voice was somehow both hollow and full. "Why can't we meet regularly?"

"I've only had my hair up a month," she said absently.

"I've fallen in love with you, see!"

He spoke in the same sort of hurriedly strained voice that people use when they wait for access to a place of private relief. They were passing Morris's public bakehouse, a stone shed which still smelt of the evening session, and always afterwards when a man said he loved her she smelt bread in memory and was always asked why she smiled like that.

"The bread smells nice," she said, not knowing what else to say, her attention on the additional tumult rising in her.

"On Saturday nights I go mad." They had begun to climb the slope leading to Bryn Hyfryd. "Just sitting drinking beer with the chaps and listening to their talk about girls and football and so on."

"People are not *bound* to sit drinking beer," she said sententiously. She had always liked him: he stirred something in her: something to do with

taking care of him. But he did not look as though he'd have the stamina to go mad on Saturday or any other night. "I'll make up my mind. How do you like it in the pit now?"

"I wrote a letter to you," he said, dismissing the pit subject.

"Oh, you ought to have sent it! I've never had a letter."

"I'll send one tomorrow." He took her arm. Soon the meagre trees had begun. They entered a meandering lane beside the cemetery. Further up, there was a cloud of hawthorn and a faint giggle from within it. The stars looked frothy from here. She was surprised to find herself in that place of half-strangled groves which had the reputation of being sacredly beyond council, police and chapel jurisdiction, though it had been mentioned obliquely in Christian sermons in the chapels. Just above, on the hillside and facing the noonday sun, was the Mound, of ancient lineage and reputed to be a Druidic symbol of the earth. It was said that when investigating men had dug into the ferns and brambles there, years ago, swarms of serpents, descendants of Druids' pets, were disturbed.

Some couples would not walk as far as the Mound at night.

"I'm not going to the Mound," Eva whispered. "Snakes."

"Best be vaccinated by one early and get it over." He had become confident in the lane and put an arm round her.

"I've got to go out to work soon," she told him, veering from the direction of the Mound.

"I'll be earning enough to marry you in two

years. I'll have a place of my own down-under and we'll have two babies, one of each."

"I'm going into the drapery trade," she said at random.

Beside a vacant tree surrounded by a clump of young tightly-closed ferns he stopped, tilted up her head, and slowly kissed her. His lips were deferential. She sighed. It was a moment to ponder and remember. When he drew his lips away she did not move, and when he kissed her again, lingeringly, she put her arms about him. He remained in his own world for all this intimate contact which she had never known before. She wanted to solve this alien mystery enclosed in strange ribs. At the same time she felt compassion for him; she wanted to rock him to sleep. A dog barked, somewhere near, and the small violence thrust into this pause in time made them rapidly draw apart.

"Someone's brought their dog for a walk," she said hurriedly. "I must go home."

Roughly drawing her close, he said: "It's only a chap imitating a dog, for fun." And then he had a spasm of coughing, nervous and interior, the sounds not coming out properly. The smell of hawthorn was thick. The bout of coughing passed quickly, and in a moment, to her astonishment she found herself involved in a struggle with him, as she had seen youths at horseplay in the street, though this combat was silent. In the struggle they fell clumsily into the young ferns.

"Leave me alone!" she panted, scandalised.

"No." The growl of his voice startled her.

"Yes," she said in sudden confidence, and with her hands and knees threw him away easily, and

sprang up. "The ground is damp and lumpy," she said. "Come on, Elwyn; we must go home." Walking away, she felt full of goodwill towards him.

His bashfulness on the way home increased her tenderness. She liked this mystery of men, their flavour, and their childish need of tenderness suddenly changing to attack. She would never fear them.

"You are going to walk out with me?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes." She thought of a green and purple tea-set, together with a teapot shaped like a thatched cottage, which she had seen in a Bylau shop window. 'Mrs. Eva Hughes' sounded solid. Her goodwill towards him deepened. Yet even then, as they were passing out of the lane, where the warped shrubs had lost true identity and hung as if ashamed to live, he took her right hand and pressed its palm against him. Startled, amazed, she squirmed away, and also suppressed her shocked giggle.

"Men are terrible," she observed after a minute, calling up dignity.

"I don't see much difference between men and women," he said oddly.

"What!" Her hand still tingled.

"We eat the same food," he baited, "and quarrel on the same tree."

"Well, we don't wear the same clothes."

"Clothes are not on us when we're born."

"I'll call you Bessie," she said.

"There's only one difference."

"And that's everything. What time is it, I wonder? Men have watches. I don't think I can walk out with a man that hasn't got a watch."

The streets were deserted. He took her to her front door. The recognised habit was to delay at front doors indefinitely. But though there seemed now a troth between them, even a bondage, she treated him with short shrift. "Good night," she said stolidly, that same hand on the brass latch of the door.

"I'll be at the corner at eight o'clock," he said before she vanished into the dark passage.

In the kitchen her never-idle mother was peeling shallots for pickling. She removed from her mouth the steel knitting needle supposed to prevent streaming eyes, and demanded: "Where have you been?" Linda was in bed.

"Courting," Eva said authoritatively.

"Who?"

"Elwyn Hughes."

"*He's* not a strong boy. His mother ought never to have put him in the pits."

"Strong boys are not always the best boys," Eva said in a pompous voice of knowledge. "I want something to eat." She went into the pantry lean-to which led off the kitchen, found an old crust in the brown earthenware pan, and spread it with butter: she came back gnawing it hungrily, unaware of its stale taste. Her mother rose from the table and gave her a slap on the face.

"What's that for?" Eva cried shrilly. Years had passed since the last blow and this one was not met on the fringe of fairyland.

"So that you'll remember." Mrs. Pritchard sat down again and resumed work on the shallots, though she did not put the needle back in her mouth.

Remember what? Eva glared. She sat on the three-legged stool by the fireplace and ate the crust, which now tasted stale. The struck cheek burned. Her anger passed. She felt amicable.

"I shall marry Elwyn Hughes," she said.

"No, you won't, my girl."

"People can't stop us."

"No; but other things can."

"What other things?"

Mrs. Pritchard hedged. "He ought not to be in the pits, but his mother wants his money."

"Well, so do I . . . It's nice," she said sagaciously, "to feel one is courting. It makes one feel less *small.*"

"I'm going up to Mr. Dai tomorrow to ask him to put you on his farm."

"Perhaps he'll put Elwyn on the farm too," Eva said, struck with the ideal simplicity of this. "It's true he doesn't look strong enough for the pits. A little cottage under the trees and fresh eggs every day. No coal there, I expect, but Elwyn will keep me warm."

Mrs. Pritchard looked as though she thought her daughter was giving one of her performances—which Eva was, partially, sudden love at that age being a mingling of true and false. "We're not living in Heaven," she said, and put the needle back between her lips.

The next evening she came back from Mr. Dai's house in a flurry. "He's got room for you on the farm, Eva," she announced. "Three pounds a month and your keep."

Eva was bathing before the fire in a miner's round wooden tub. "What for?" she asked, excited

and, standing in the tub, immediately feeling less hemmed-in. The farm was a train journey of two hours, she had heard, and everybody spoke of Carmarthen, in a holiday voice, as "the country".

"For helping," Mrs. Pritchard replied largely. "A married couple is there, and Jinny Morgan is with them at present but has got married to a sailor boy of Swansea, where she wants to live now."

"Jinny Morgan," Eva said reflectively; "she used to recite in Sunday-school Penny Readings, and she dressed up as a man to go into a public house for a bet."

"You're to go up to see Mr. Dai tomorrow evening . . . Mrs. Dai is there too," Mrs. Pritchard added, looking satisfied. Anything under Mr. Dai's wing was of sterling worth to her. All those nonsense tales of him being a wild one and a man for women—why, they were stupid. Though no doubt he had his little failings. He was a credit to Bylau and sat on the magistrate's bench, where he was known to be lenient. Benevolent acts offset little failings. Only the other month he sent a miner who had crushed a leg in the pit to recuperate at the farm. And Mrs. Dai, when she wasn't in London, went to the farm sometimes to rest from her public work. She was a clever and serious woman, it was said, going in for this Socialism, which, however, didn't seem right, a woman of her position who probably had never lifted a flat-iron.

Eva put a red ribbon in her hair the next evening, slipped on a clean frock, and wished she had perfume. Arrived at Nantcellan, a pleasing sense of martyrdom both made her glow and feel sedate. She must not be a burden on poor Mam,

and brainy little Linda needed money and care. Any job given her on the farm would be done well.

In the hall, May Lewis whispered to her, as though in warning: "Mrs. Dai is here just now. They say in the kitchen she's black and blue all over."

Eva stared. "Black and blue?"

"Been fighting with those dock strikers and socialists in London. Riots all over the place. Now she's resting here with her nose in a lot of books."

Eva tried to adjust her knowledge of socialists. She had thought they were classed with violent drunkards and strange religious maniacs, and although she felt little condemnation for any sort of person she was sure the wife of Mr. Dai could not be awful.

"What do socialists do?" she whispered.

"They're like those suffragettes used to be and want us to be the same as men."

Eva, remembering Elwyn, murmured: "We can't be the same as men."

"That's what I said to Mrs. Boore the cook. But she said 'In our minds we can'. It has to do with voting for Parliament," May said in afterthought.

A man with a crutch and bandaged foot came out of Mr. Dai's room. Inside, Eva found Mr. Dai stroking a fluffily silken white cat which sat, mild and magnificent, on his desk. She was relieved to find Mrs. Dai was not there. He put her at her ease at once, saying cheerfully: "So you got no voice, Eva! A pity. You want to do something with yourself, I can see. You're the sort that breaks the pot they're growing in."

She gazed in pleasure at the cat whose royal fur

and seraglio eyes made her think of women sitting on marble floors in satin bloomers.

"It's a lovely cat," she said deeply, as though she hadn't heard what Mr. Dai had said. "You don't see cats like that out in the streets."

This pleased Mr. Dai; he laughed and pushed the peak of his cap up, sitting back. "Victoria her name. Cost ten pounds; Angora the breed. Like to stroke her?" She went across to the desk, stood beside him, and stroked the cat, which accepted the tribute as its due. "After being in the colliery all day," Mr. Dai said, "it's nice to wash my hands and stroke her. Comes to me every day to be stroked."

"It's like stroking water!"

"You stroke her right." Mr. Dai watched her; his bright eyes seemed to have shreds of fresh-made marmalade in them. "She doesn't like a bossy hand. What age are you, Eva?"

She considered this question for several moments.

"Seventeen next birthday."

"Not courting yet?"

"Oh no, Mr. Dai. There's life to see to, first."

His shout of laughter made the cat pause in its deigning purr. "The boys in our pits run after you, surely?"

She liked the "our", when the pits were his—or at least he was the boss of them, the Company owning the colliery being unknown and aloof as people secure in Heaven; it made her feel that all Bylau was one big family, like those families in the Old Testament. "But I don't run after them," she said.

He looked at her hard, as if unsure what to think. "Well," he said, "you are ready to go to the farm? Quiet there, don't forget."

"Quiet won't upset me," she said, not moving away from the desk.

"Mrs. Pryce will see you, then." He got up, at the same time patting her hand encouragingly. "Go and sit over there by the piano, my gal. Your father was one of my best cutters. It broke my heart, the day they brought him up in the cage and I saw it was all over with him, though he was laughing and said to me: 'Get me a pint, Mr. Dai, before the doctor comes.' There was not a drop of anything in the offices except brandy, and he wouldn't touch that—said brandy was only for people sick in bed. Passed away in a couple of hours. You were in school that afternoon, I expect?"

"They called me home." She spoke without emotion, accepting the black happening of that afternoon as such hazards were accepted in Bylau: no man was forced to go down the pits. But she remembered that there was no time to feel: neighbours and other callers held everything at bay. And when she had seen her washed dead father at last he looked comfortable but surprised, the red in his cheeks, which the pits had never robbed him of, still there. He had been a strong, enjoying man, always out at sports and sprees, and rarely belittling anything. He took pleasure in the fact that his eldest daughter resembled in countenance his Aunt Maria, the one that had been fined for violently assaulting a woman neighbour who had beat a whippet to death in order to spite her husband.

"Clara!" Mr. Dai shouted through the window into the back garden. "Clara, can you come in?"

Mrs. Dai presently came in, carrying a basket full of lettuces and other green stuff. There was no sign

of her being a mass of bruises. She was a square, florid woman with the look of someone that spends a great deal of time waiting on railway platforms. Her mouth was roundly open as though to protest. Power was in her solid frame and a lack of persuasion in her heiress eye: her father had been a Cardiff shipowner. She treated Eva as a member of the public in a large hall, looking at her as if she was a hundred people.

"This is Eva, who is going to work at Penllyn," her husband said, taking a spring onion out of the basket and eating it unwashed and unpeeled.

Mrs. Dai, in a surprisingly thin voice, said: "Have you explained to this young lady the difference between life in Bylau and the country?"

"Nearly everybody in Bylau, Clara, has country blood in their veins. They take to rural matters like ducks to water."

"Bylau-born children are conditioned by industrial activities and urban conveniences. The other girl—what is her name, the one who is going? Ah, Jinny—complained that the well-water made tea unpalatable and that the sanitation arrangements were upsetting. . . . You wish to ask me questions?" she addressed Eva, further astonishing her. "About conditions in Penllyn?" she encouraged in a just, if not benign, manner. "There is no gas or electricity, only oil lamps, for instance."

Eva said, nervous at last: "I know how to fill a lamp but I have never milked cows."

Mrs. Dai, while Mr. Dai sat restlessly moving some desk papers, gave her a sudden full and glimmering look. Standing, Eva felt exposed and fully detected by Mrs. Dai, though what was

detected she would not have been able to say. Mrs. Dai then lowered her lids, lifted them, and resumed: "You are able to choose your life. Choice, that is the secret. Women must choose, as men choose. Women must not be weak any more, they must know how to choose—and how serious it is to choose. We must not allow ourselves to be governed by our weak feelings: that has been our trouble." She took up the basket of green stuff from the desk, in the manner of one who shrugs shoulders, and, as though still pursuing a policy of surprise, left the room without another word.

Eva sat down quickly on the piano stool, and immediately got up, reddening. "Sit down, Eva," Mr. Dai said, and again began to stroke the cat, which all the time had sat monumental as one whose lineage absolves him from comment.

"My work in the country is what, please?" she asked, deciding on the concrete.

"Well . . . helping to look after the house, go errands into Carmarthen town. You will be company there for everybody. Needs a lively young person in the house. You can sing as much as you like, and see to the flowers. You can grow up there."

He sat looking at her across the desk considcringly, a man become handsome in deeds and labour, and somehow the askew cap lent him, if not a ruffianly air, a demeanour of indifference to opinion. Did he wear it on the magistrates' bench? She, in her turn, gave him an intent look. Did he want a daughter? The thought occurred to her. He had no one to bring up. On the other hand, sons and daughters could be a worry; she couldn't

imagine anyone feeling starved of them. Children needed parents much more than parents needed children, surely? She felt well-disposed towards him, but could not quite believe that he, boss and busy, was a sad man with an empty heart. He only wanted someone to amuse him. Her mind became full of a ready awareness that had not yet crystallised.

"You will want me to start soon?" she asked, suddenly feeling safe with him.

"Next month, the first, when Jinny goes." He smiled at her as if knowing all the movements of her mind, though the smile was absent. "You are a good girl, Eva. Run away, now."

At home, her mother was out, taking a basket of washing to a chapel minister's wife. Linda, condemnatory, handed her a letter which she took from inside her knickers. "Found it on the mat in the passage," she said oilily. "From someone, I expect? Dropped it in; can't afford a stamp. If you give me your autograph album I won't tell Mam." The album was filled with signatures of visiting concert singers, and, more rare, one of a convict.

"You can tell her." Assured, a wage-earner just enrolled, Eva cruelly shut herself in the front room to read the letter, which had stamp-edging stuck along the envelope flap and was inscribed: *To Miss Eva Pritchard, Private.*

A letter lost prestige when delivered in this way, and not through the post. But it was her first. And from a man. She fondled it before opening it; a hush came over her. The excitement of the important evening had made her tired after all. She felt well-behaved as on Sunday. But when at

last she read the letter, in the grey evening light. her face began to flush. After hurriedly folding the three sheets and putting them inside her blouse, she brought them out again, re-read them with startled gaze, then cautiously opened the door, walked into the kitchen and threw the crushed sheets into the fire.

"From that Elwyn, I suppose?" Linda asked, not pausing from the homework essay she was composing with a top-of-the-class concentration.

"Mind your own business." Still feeling red in the face, Eva went upstairs.

Of course, they were like that. They couldn't help it; it was their nature. But to put such matters into words and drop the letter, even if it was sealed with stamp-edging, into one's house! She sat at the bedroom window in the dusk, after a while burst into a half-choked giggle, got up, stared with indignation into the glass, then went silently downstairs and slipped out of the front door.

He was at the corner, alone, hands glumly in trouser pockets and—it came to her even across the road in the dusk—an eternal vigilance in his whole body. In a moment he was at her side, alert as a hound, before she had time to pretend by her bearing and direction that she had come out on a domestic errand.

"Come to the Fair? I've got three-and-six."

"Fair?" she hummed. "What Fair?"

"Come on."

She found herself by his side going down the long narrow street towards the waste ground by the river where, in a flaring phosphorescence of acid green and red of butcher's meat, the collection of painted

caravans, striped booths and roundabouts had pitched for three days. Up the street came the enticing see-saw music. "I was going to take my sister there on Saturday," she said, dismayed at her weakness. "No, no."

"What's the matter with you? They've got a pickled mermaid there and a woman tattooed all over."

She stopped outside the Unitarian chapel and mumbled with her jaw out, her voice sounding unnatural: "Please do not send such letters as that to my home again."

"I got out of bed last night and wrote it by candlelight!" he exclaimed, as though that justified the contents. "I couldn't sleep for thinking of you. Come on." He drew her by the arm down the street.

"How do you know such things about girls?" she protested, her jaw gone back to normal.

"We talk in the pits."

"A lot of shameful talk, I expect."

"Aye. It doesn't make any difference, though, to what we think and feel."

They entered the crowded Fair. Three-and-six was three-and-six. After going on the plunging horses they went into a little pink train which shot up a shaky track and dived into a tunnel, of which Elwyn took outrageous advantage. She had to forgive him when, despite his apparent lack of muscle, he knocked down a coconut for her at the three-balls-a-penny stall. At the hoop-la stall she caught sight of her mother across the circular table packed with mantelpiece ornaments, jewellery, and wedding-present articles.

Mam was alone among the press of young players throwing hoops from the barrier; she stood passive and unsmiling, looking at the gay prizes on the table. People shrieked, a roundabout organ played an opulent waltz, the fiery lamps washed everyone's face into a strange clarity, unreal and cruel. Eva stood arrested. All the Fair was fraudulent but somehow sinister, held in a dream kingdom which would vanish with the caravans when they passed mysteriously through the night. Elwyn bought three hoops for himself, three for her: she took them mechanically, staring at her secret mother. Why had she come there, alone, a widow dissociated from such frivolity? Had she come in memory of her courting days? In her grey face there was a reduced quietness; she looked like someone who would never admit to hunger. Knowing at once it would be a mistake to approach her, or let her be detected, Eva gave the three hoops to Elwyn and hid herself behind two burly young colliers. Thoughts of holidays, a detached house with bay-windows, joints, poultry and baskets of fruit, a black box in the bank full of gold, preoccupied her while she waited. Elwyn pushed his way to her triumphantly carrying an alarm clock.

"There! No excuse for us not getting up for the day shift when we're married! Got it with one of your hoops. What's wrong?"

"Let's go now." She carried the alarm clock against her chest, like a serious fiancée. Elwyn pushed the coconut into his jacket pocket. An element of success, to be broken at one's peril, enclosed them now. Protesting that he had over two shillings left, he wanted to extend their luck

at other stalls. And there was the tattooed woman still to see; in addition to the Bay of Naples on her stomach she had the Ten Commandments written inside a flaming sun on her back.

"The fortune teller, then!" he pleaded. "You go in her caravan alone, go on."

She shivered, having seen the heavy-jowled woman sitting at the caravan door. "I must go home now," she said.

"No!" he wailed, excited. "Let's go up to Bryn Hyfryd. We'll set the alarm clock going and frighten all the sweethearts out from under the bushes."

She shook her head. "No." They were on the edge of the Fair in a papery light like Chinese lanterns: Elwyn's face looked yellow and blue in it.

"No! Always no. Can't you say 'yes' to anything? Come on. Bryn Hyfryd."

She stood watching the shining river. "I'm going away to work," she said.

"Going away? Work? Where?"

"To Mr. Dai's farm."

"What!" He gripped her arm, and the strength of his fingers astonished her. "We're walking out together," he said, confused.

"Mr. Dai's farm is not in Australia." The obscure pity stirred in her again. "And you are fond of writing letters! You're hurting me." She shook her arm free. "I've got to work. My mother is poor and Linda wants to be a school-teacher."

"Let's sit down here," he said, in a swallowing voice. They sat on the grass behind the caravans, and for a minute he was silent. Then he said: "You

know what the chaps in the pits say about Mr. Dai?"

"How can I? . . . He's a good man."

"He's after every woman and girl he can get, 'specially married ones."

After a pause, she said, as if jesting: "They're all the same . . . men. Nearly all; I can't see *some* men in Bylau bothering about it . . . ministers and quiet men," she added vaguely. "People talk!"

"They say he's got a lot of children in Bylau and hereabouts. From married women, too."

She laughed. "How many hundreds? . . . Mr. Dai is respected."

"He's a good boss. He'd better be!"

"Well, I can't worry about him. It's like worrying about the King of England."

"One or two chaps in the pits," he said, "red-hot socialists, have got him taped. They say he's a cunning old Turk that only pretends to study the men, so that he can help himself to the women and nothing said—it's a mania, they say; just off his head about women."

"They go to him willing and obedient in dozens?" She even tittered at this vision, although anger came from Elwyn.

"He's boss of the place," he said sullenly, "and gives a piano away as if it's a packet of tea."

"Mr. Dai is always seeing that people are comfortable in the hospital," she said, remembering that he was on the hospital board. "And we don't have a lot of strikes and lock-outs in Bylau like they do in other places. I remember my father saying that Mr. Dai knew how to sell coal better than any other boss."

"Bylau coal is the best coal in Glamorgan, and

the pits are never short of orders; that's all. I'm not saying he's a bad boss, but a bad man. Only the other week I heard he had got stuck with the wife of Luther Parry who's always out of work and just sits at home writing poetry, though he never wins prizes at the eisteddfods. They say Luther writes funny poetry for Mr. Dai at ten bob a time—and it isn't poetry that could be recited in chapel."

"Well, I'm not a married woman."

"You're laughing at me," he accused, peering at her.

"It's all so silly." But she wondered why she felt so peculiar about his warnings and anger. Not peculiar from fright—Mr. Dai wasn't a missionary from the Mormons or a stranger prowling from England for prey—but from excitement. "Mrs. Dai spoke to me at the house."

"*She's* off her head too," he growled obstinately.

"Now, Elwyn!" She placed her hand, warm and plump, over his; into her voice came a new tender note. "I'm fond of you, Elwyn. Will you come and see me at the farm now and again, on Sundays and Bank Holidays? I'd like that."

"Swear," he said suddenly, fixing her hand in that tenacious grip, "swear you will keep yourself for me some day."

"What, for marriage, you mean?" The throw of the fairground lights illumined his eyes. He was like a nameless stranger now, a mystery, and love for him stirred in her. Tonight she did not want to take an interest in Elwyn Hughes, a young miner who would settle in Bylau and join one of the workmen's clubs. But she liked the young man sitting beside her and wished he would talk of matters that

had no connection with Bylau, Mr. Dai, or these silly gossips.

"For everything," he replied.

She laughed tenderly. "Yes, I swear. . . . Shall we drink out of the coconut? It's pretty here: the lights and the music. Tell me something pretty," she said, putting the alarm clock behind her. "Be my fortune teller. Where's the coconut? We can make a hole for the milk with my hair-prong if you haven't got a pen-knife."

"I've got one," he said, still gloomy however. He pierced the coconut top and, sucking thirstily, they drank out of the hairy lip in turn. But he would not throw off his sulking, not even when she laid her head on his shoulder. Flattered, aware of power without being conceited about it, she complimented him on his looks. She said that if he borrowed a bicycle and started out at dawn he could often come to the farm on Sundays; she was sure Mr. Dai wouldn't mind one of his own men going there to see her; in fact, he had asked her (she remembered her untruthful reply) if one was courting her. But suddenly Elwyn hurled the coconut over the bank into the river, got up, and walked away without a word.

Disconcerted, she watched his thin, anger-hunched shoulders disappear into the blaring light and music. Respect and a strange new tenderness for him filled her. She wished him back, though not in his present mood. She would have liked him to make love to her in the dark groves of Bryn Hyfryd, anonymous and indifferent to everything else. She waited for a while, contemplative, but he did not return. She got up, remembered the

alarm clock, fetched it, and skirted the back of the roaring Fair to the exit which led up to the everyday Square.

She found a young man walking by her side. He asked: "Alarm clock gone off, has it, and you've got to go home?" One of the new tramcars, golden-lit and crowded, waited in the Square: people still took rides in them for the novelty of it, though Mr. Dai, other bigwigs with him, had inaugurated the first journey months ago. "Come for a ride on the tram?" the young man asked.

"They don't go my way," she smiled.

"Let me carry your clock, then?" He walked so close to her that their hips rubbed. She did not know him; many people came down from the inner valley to Bylau for the Fair. He looked gay and glistening like a young soldier out on the spree; there was an unshakeable purposefulness in his manner which threw a thick air of physical relish about her, so that even her gait seemed impeded. Nevertheless she liked him there beside her and his serenading. "I saw you in the Fair," he said, "with a fellow—your brother?"

"No; my grandfather. . . . Good-night."

"A champion girl like you can't go home alone! Not with the pubs turning out and wolves coming down from the mountains. Bylau is bad at nights, they say up our way. I'll get you safe to your door."

She wished Elwyn would see them. They walked through the Square and climbed Caersalem Street. He was voluble, telling her he was a newcomer to the district, and about his work in the new Ystrad colliery, his lodgings and the fooball team he played for: now all he wanted was a girl: he was lonely.

He became serious and earnest and took her arm. But she would not yield the clock; somehow it gave her a sense of ordinary safety.

"You ought to go to a chapel and join the choir," she said.

"I'm a Freethinker," he said glibly. "A long time since I saw a beauty like you. Courting? No? Then what about me?"

"I live down here." She stopped at the entrance to the back lane intersecting the rows of terraces: no one was about. "I'm going away from Bylau to work."

"A pity!" He drew her a little way inside the lane. "Give me a kiss instead? Just one."

"One," she said, liking him, wanting the adventure of a stranger's kiss, wanting to talk to him for a long time about nothing, and knowing it to be impossible. In the shadow of a back garden wall, an arm over her shoulder, he kissed her. She found herself immovable. Her little struggle abated. Who was he?—this mystery who was at the same time a living, warm, intimate man of whom she was not afraid, whom she liked and desired to know. At the same time she accepted that all this was wrong. The kiss lasted a long time. She heard the crunching of a sheep's jaw not far away.

"Come further up the lane?" he whispered at last, holding her.

"No," she said, swallowing, wanting to go with him.

"Put the clock down, then, and hold your arms round me here——"

She broke free of his clasp. It was like breaking free of a warm sleep. She dared not look at his

stranger's face. Escaping his outstretched hand, she stood in the open road outside the dark lane, ready to go. "I said *one*," she told him, looking at the face of the clock in her hand.

"See me again, then?" he asked amicably. The kiss had pleased him enormously. He sounded solved and appeased, like a young man who would walk home whistling and bang the door going in, oblivous of sleepers.

"Saturday," she lied, unable to refuse; "I'll be in the Square on Saturday."

"I'll be there! What's your name?"

"Jinny," she replied idiotically. "Jinny Morgans."

"Mine's Iorwerth—Iorwerth B. Johns on my Post Office savings book."

"Good-night." She hastened towards the safe front of the terrace.

At home her mother's examining look was detained by the clock. Eva, exuding complacence, related how Elwyn had won it. She did not mention that she had seen Mam in the Fair. Then there was the recital of what had transpired at Mr. Dai's. "There's a full day!" she concluded, expanding. "I feel settled. I wonder will this clock go?" She wound it. It ticked.

"It's proper you should get an alarm clock today!" Mam said, not melancholy but in a way natural to a poor widow with one daughter come to clear domestic blossom, and another stirring studiously in the bud and no doubt more the pride of the family. "Where else have you been tonight?"

"Nowhere else. I'd better get married soon." She put the clock on the mantelpiece between the china

spaniel dog and the tea caddy. "That's what we are all born for."

"Not to Elwyn," Mam said calmly.

"I love Elwyn." She might have been chalking it on a public wall. Her mother said no more.

He dropped a letter in the passage the next day, as respectable a letter as could be written, like an essay in the English lesson at school. It apologised for his bad temper in the fairground and said he would be waiting for her at the corner every evening until she left for the old Turk's farm. After that she met him several times, walking the streets, but refusing to go to the privacies of Bryn Hyfryd because she was afraid of herself during this momentous time. He pleaded, became in turn abject, evil-tempered, and grieved. She kept on telling him he must visit her at the farm.

She imagined herself looking after him in some idyllic cottage buried in everlasting hollyhocks and trees always in fruit: they would love each other all and every night, and in the country dawns no harsh pit hooter bellowed at men to rise and come to the pits. In some obscure way the delicate warmth of his lightweight flesh had already become part of her own confident flesh. She was ashamed of that episode with the young man picked up outside the Fair.

She left Bylau on the first of the month without mishap of any of the arrangements. Her own lack of fuss or fear surprised her, and Mam, as was natural, was pleased to be eased of expense so that she could concentrate more on brainy Linda. "The fresh country air will do you good," Mam said on the station, though no one flourished better in

Bylau than Eva, "and the milk there is yellow with cream. You'll be home for your holiday. Don't cry." Eva said she was not crying. After all, the distance between Bylau and the farm was only forty miles. The train achieved the distance without breaking down, she ate a bag of apples and, in the manner of a ripe traveller, asked a man in the compartment to shut a window as she felt a draught.

The farm lay six miles from Carmarthen town, but anyone would think there was no other abode of people for a hundred miles. She had never known such quiet. The moist green slopes, spacious and unperturbed, contained cows and sheep that might have been there since the world began, they looked so unmolested. The house stood on the bed of the wide vale. A blue streak of willow-bordered water, in which trout moved among cress and stones, ran beside it. She always remembered her first glimpse of the place, coming over the slope in a trap with Martin holding the reins beside her. Except on an almanac picture she had never seen such beautiful countryside before.

Martin had met her at the station and heaved her corded tin trunk to the back of the trap. He was an elderly man with astonished eyes. His wife, Mari, often called him The Thinker, because he was so silent, and treated him with well-disposed derision. He had spoken little on the journey, though she encouraged him with pleased smiles. Mari ran hastily from behind the whitewashed house when they arrived, a golden retriever loping beside her, and treated Eva as a person of consequence.

"They always come from the coal places looking clean as dollies!" she exclaimed. "You got a lovely

skin, my girl. Go and put the kettle on, Martin."

"The young lady had tea in the junction." Martin backed the horse and trap into an open barn where, from shadows under a blue tumbril, hens peeped cautiously at the newcomer. He never hurried over anything, and Mari would say there was "something the matter with him," though what it was she had no idea.

"Mr. Dai told me last Sunday it was your first place," Mari declared. Animation made her seem half her dignified age. "You can work, can you? Or are you like Jinny Morgans that would take a whole morning to trim a lamp?"

Eva thought that perhaps Mari was fond of her glass but found she was not. She had kept her high spirits into the seventies because of her acceptance of things, never worrying. She and The Thinker had a son in the Merchant Navy, named outlandishly, for some reason, Eliseus, and a married daughter living in Ireland. None of the cattle belonged to the farm; Mr. Dai hired out his pasture land; Penllyn was only a farm in name. There was a proper farm hidden behind a wood down the vale. Penllyn seemed the pleasance of a well-off man who would spend the evening of his days there. Mr. Dai often came there week-ends, Mari told Eva whilst boiling an egg for her tea, and sometimes a whole week or so, for the trout. No, Mrs. Dai seldom came; she didn't like the country and preferred going to London.

"What am I to work at?" Eva asked, relieved that there were no cattle.

"Help me in the house. I'm not the woman I was, and sometimes I go to my daughter in Ireland

by ship from Pembroke Dock. She wants The Thinker and me to settle with her. I expect Mr. Dai is hoping you will settle here instead if we go."

"Me? Alone? I can't spend nights by myself here."

"Well, you can find a husband."

"Why didn't Jinny Morgans settle here?" Eva asked, calculating on the possibility of Elwyn coming.

"Too quiet for her," Mari replied, blinking; "and her husband said 'No' to it too. He was a funny one. Jinny fell in love with him like mad, it was surprising, I didn't think she had it in her. Well, we've got the pigs to look after, fifteen just now, and the horse. When Martin has a big lot of thinking and hides himself you must take the cart to Carmarthen with the eggs and fetch the pig-swill back. You can drive a horse and cart?"

"No," Eva said, admiring the long-beamed living-room with its black furniture and enormous fireplace, and thinking how she'd like to be mistress of it.

"Well, then, you can answer the telephone when it goes?" Eva looked at her suspiciously; but Mari went on as though there were no fools in the world: "The horse knows the way to Carmarthen and back by himself; all you got to do is deliver the eggs and bring the pig-swill. You go and talk to the horse now and give him a potato. Llew's his name."

At first the days seemed haphazard at the farm, but this was because there was not much work and Mari had too much energy, rushing about and exclaiming, perhaps to offset the quiet and her

pondering husband. She would polish an oak chair twice in one day and clean the gathered eggs as though they were brass. Up with the rim of the sun, she baked bread at midnight, but often fell suddenly into a snore for an hour in the afternoon, almost on her feet. Martin carved fancy wooden spoons, at which he earned money in Carmarthen, the handle designs being very good. Both had great respect and admiration for Mr. Dai, who was of local origin and had fared forth into the El Dorado of the coalfields and reached the top by brains, besides marrying good-class money.

"Sometimes," Mari said, "men come here from his pits to repair their legs and backs, and they go home with a switch of bacon and three dozen of eggs. Then there's Mr. Luther Parry with his poetrys, a lovely man; Mr. Dai likes him to be here to argue with and for his works written on paper—the dresser drawer is full of them, locked up."

"Mr. Dai is a tremendous man," Eva said, meaning in character.

But she remembered Elwyn's warnings. Had she been sent here as Mr. Dai's latest fancy? She was impressed but uneasy. A man established in position and years would surely expect unusual things of her. She would have to talk cleverly, wear clothes, and understand how to behave with him, though he always wore a working cap and smelt faintly of the pits like her father had done even after his bath in the kitchen.

Mari said to her one day: "There's two dresses in the wardrobe in your room—you have seen them. I expect. Best muslin with dots, one pink with white dots, and one white with pink dots. Try them

on and I will alter them if they don't fit. When Mr. Dai comes you better be wearing one."

"Why?"

"A liking he has for the gel here to walk about the house and fields in muslin with dots." She gave the retriever a blow with her hand. "A family of six or seven growing daughters he ought to have; that would cure him, the price best muslin is in Carmarthen."

Eva inspected the dresses. They were indeed of good quality and very pretty with flounces, billowing sleeves and square-cut neck, and they fitted her without alterations. They had been washed and ironed by Mari, who admired: "You look pretty enough for the King of the Persians."

"They belong to the house or are they for me to keep?"

Mari became vague. "No doubt it depends. Jinny Morgans wanted them, but her husband wouldn't let her take them."

"Oh!" Not knowing what she really thought, Eva sat down, the high-price muslin plentiful about her legs. They were in the huge kitchen, with a flaming sunset at the open door and the smell of trees and hills and mountain-fresh water coming in.

Mari asked: "You have got a young man in Bylau?"

"Yes," Eva replied, after hesitating.

"That's right," Mari approved. "Mr. Dai likes a young lady to be settled with a young man. Keeps them from being flighty and cantankerous, he says. Your one works in Mr. Dai's pits? . . . Ah! I expect Mr. Dai will find him a good place in the pits." Eva sat silent, the red sunset light warming

the white muslin. When Martin loomed in at the doorway he took no notice of her and the finery. "Well," Mari raised her voice, as to the deaf, "here's my old Thinker back again. How were things in Parliament today? Come on, boy bach, I've kept the muffins hot for you."

For all her derision she was devoted to Martin and fed him like a turkey-cock. Perhaps the prolonged moods of thought made him hungry, for he ate well. He was not taciturn or melancholy, only detached, like a saint. Working at the spoon-carving in one of the barns he had the look of a man from olden times when there was no money.

"When I married him first," Mari told Eva, "I used to worry that he ought to give vent to what was inside him, but now I like him quiet. Things can be said without a tongue. His ways are golden."

"He adds to the quiet," Eva said, without sign of nerves.

She always remembered the silence of Penllyn. Household work done—or as much as Mari would allow her—she would wander about the farm purlieus and think she was becoming a Thinker like Martin. There was little to laugh at and for some reason she rarely sang now, though sometimes Mari played, in a thumping fashion, the piano which stood unaccountably on the landing on top of a staircase which seemed built for the climbing of horses. She could hear the wheat whisper and see the plums swell. Best of all she liked the pigs, especially Dol, the docile sow, a great buff blob of comfortable energy, a true daughter of the earth and for ever kissing it in grunting adoration. Mari did not care much for this sow and said: "I never

knew one that enjoyed what she's for so much as that old sinner. Her blood is from the tip-top and she cost Mr. Dai a lot."

On Wednesday, to show the method, Mari came with her in the cart to deliver eggs at a warehouse in Carmarthen and to fetch pig-swill, which smelt evilly. On the way back Eva took the reins confidently. Otherwise the days passed without event and she pored over a book from the glass bookcase, Volume I of the *Life of Queen Victoria.* The telephone rang once, Mari shouted and ran about in disorder, and after a lot of instructions from her beside the box contraption fixed into the wall, Eva, who had turned pale, heard a voice say that the length of flannel ordered by Mr. David Pryce was ready and would be left for collection in the Ivy Bush Hotel.

"Mr. Dai had that telephone put in," Mari panted, "in case he had to be called back to the pits suddenly."

It rang again on the Thursday morning of Eva's second week. But she was out picking red currants behind the house. When she went in, Mari said. scurrying: "Mr. Dai is coming tomorrow for a week."

"What will the pits do in Bylau?" Eva murmured, gazing into the bowl of currants.

"The Deputy is there, of course. What you gaping for? Fetch me the yeast, I got to bake bread." Mari was up till past midnight, waiting for the dough to rise, and all night the house was full of the smell of baking bread.

Martin went to fetch Mr. Dai in the trap. Mari put on a beetroot-coloured gown with a bunch of

old lace and a large cameo brooch at the neck, Eva the pink-dotted white muslin dress. "Mr. Dai doesn't like eating by himself," Mari said, laying places for four at the long patriarchal table in the main room which looked out over the vale: it was to be a ham and eggs tea. "Fetch the doilies, Eva. Don't stand there looking like that! Enough to have one thinker in the house."

"I'm not thinking," Eva said, touchily.

"What are you doing, then?"

"Admiring the china." Sight of the painted oak-leaves and purple grapes of the ceremonial crockery, kept until now in a triangular cupboard of carved black oak, overcame her with a sense of luxury.

Mr. Dai was wearing a cap just the same, though it was not a grimy pit one, and an old green jacket and flannel shirt. When he saw her, standing meek in the muslin, he smiled. "Country roses in your cheeks already, Eva!" He patted one of them. "But mind you don't get too fat on Mari's butter—you'll be inclined to fat. Your mother came to me for your wages and said she was sending you pocket money by postal order. That right?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Dai. She's saving it up for my sister Linda to go to the training place for teachers."

"So I hear. No tea yet, Mari. I'm going down to the water first to see the trout. Come on, Eva, my girl." The day was warm. He looked fresh and clean, except for dark wrinkles about his eyes, in which coal-grit seemed to be embedded immovably.

From the first he treated her as a person of his own standing, age and scope. He seemed to want a companion. Sometimes, despite the muslin dress

and the way he put an arm over her shoulders, she felt herself to be male. That first afternoon she walked with him to the stream and under the willows searched for the shadowy fish in the slow translucent blue. He talked of the trout like a man talking to another. She saw the coarse skin of his face near to hers, the short truculent nose, and remembered his broad hand stroking the cat which made him seem less the General Manager in charge of many hundred men and dangerous day and night shifts.

"They sleep a lot!" she said, peering. "Nice to sleep under a rock and let the water fan you." Her unease had gone. A forthright pleasure and an air of release from Bylau working days came from him. It spread harmony.

"Seeing trout in a stream that moves like a funeral is good for peace of mind, Eva. You and I will sit here all day where the sun is out and you in your muslin?"

"You like me in the muslin?" she asked curiously.

"Aye." He gazed into the water for a long while, as if he was thinking of something or somebody that had nothing to do with her. It was funny that the General Manager of Bylau pits should have such fancies as this one about muslin. She liked it as she had liked the stroking of the cat. The sense of safety was increased.

Later, after the ham and eggs, he went to look over the pigs and hen-coops with Martin. Mari, as she and Eva cleared the table, said: "By tomorrow there'll be ten years off him. He will stand straight and start singing like a soloist in chapel, his mouth wide open. The pits put worry in him."

"Men get killed and hurt in the pits. My father was one."

"No wonder he wants to be kind to the daughter." Mari unbuttoned her best kid-leather boots. "One good thing in him is that he doesn't drink. Nor Mrs. Dai. Not a drop between them. No one can point a finger. Solid temperance people."

She had told Eva that the farm had been bought by Mrs. Dai, who had plenty of money but could not tell a goose from a gander; it was Mr. Dai that had wanted the place. On the rare occasions when Mrs. Dai came to the house she seldom went outside the door but sat reading books all day and slept all night so heavily that her deep breathing could be heard everywhere upstairs. She seldom smiled, either, but was upset when she heard of some woman unjustly used by landlord, magistrate or other man of power. Mr. Dai treated her with great consideration and it had been a pleasure, on Sunday evenings, to see them together at the piano singing a duet.

"What does she do in London?" Eva asked.

"Sits on committees," Mari replied, offhand; "having to do with slaves and blacks, I think."

"Socialism, I heard it was," Eva said.

"I daresay. Providing it was in the middle of a hall full of people she'd sit on any basket of fusses, but ask her to sit at home with her hard-working husband and she'd look at you as if you were a Chinawoman." Mari added: "She was born like that and doesn't have feelings about such things. Now, look at The Thinker and me! My mother locked me up from him and we couldn't get married

till I found myself carrying our Betti by him. But we were happy as a couple of birds building a nest of twigs off the ground. Love was between us. He courted me in bed, like they used to do more often in those days, climbing through the window at night, and he never said much, thank God, with my mother lying in the next room and her ears outside the blanket like a wolf's. It was natural as the rain coming down on a cabbage. . . . But Mr. Dai," Mari veered again, "he is going parched and has married a book." She added: "A good book."

Eva thought she had better not mention those Bylau rumours of Mr. Dai being a wild and weak one for women. Already she had decided to feel a sense of responsibility towards him. He needed love. Even an important man like him! Also, her own sense of well-being had increased at this farm. An atmosphere of protection was there. She read Elwyn's loving letters—one came every alternate day—with great pleasure, and replied twice a week in the same strain. Two men, an old and a young one, needed her devotion. She had room for both.

The activity she had been expecting happened three days after Mr. Dai's arrival, in the afternoon. Mari and Martin had gone to Carmarthen in the trap to see Worple's Circus, there for two days in a tent. Shortly after their departure Mr. Dai, as they left the house for, she understood, the trout stream, asked her: "Now, Eva, you will go up into the hay with me?"

"Yes, Mr. Dai," she said readily, not quite knowing what he meant by hay or the necessity for it. He was leading her towards the large barn. In the

forepart beyond the wide open doors was the painted tumbril, beyond it the horse's stall, and in the loft, reached by a ladder to a trap-door, a store of hay. She giggled when she began to mount the ladder. There was always something comic about going up a ladder. Mr. Dai, in his cap, stood watching her. Turning, she saw his face puckered up and serious. She helped him to land—he came up slowly, a far-off look on his face. Was he thinking of some bygone occasion when perhaps he had leapt up such a ladder as this?

"Going up in your muslin dress!" he said, taking her hand.

He put his arm around her waist and drew her towards the hay. There was not much light from a small pane of glass in the tiles, and the warm air hung fragrant with the scent of that year's hay. Two bales stood against the end wall, another was strewn open on the floor. "When I was sixteen," Mr. Dai said, his arm still about her, "I used to work on a farm like this." He wasn't mournful. But it was as though he wanted to remember something gone for ever.

"You were courting someone?" she asked.

He frowned a moment and did not reply. Then he turned her to him and kissed her. The coolness of his lips surprised her because he suggested a fiery man. He led her to the strewn hay. She went without demur. Mostly she felt curiosity. But she wasn't frightened. Not with Mr. Dai. They stayed in the hay longer than she expected. He treated her with respect and gentleness and, in addition, praised her. Again she was surprised by his docility, expecting something savage. After a while he dozed. She lay

gazing at his cap and green jacket which hung on a wall nail. She felt uncomfortable but important. Peering down, she took a couple of handfuls of hay and scattered them. She wished he would leave her now, so that she could attend to herself and pay attention without hindrance to what she was feeling deep down.

Leaning on her elbow, she looked at his face. A person's face in sleep reveals a different person than when awake, and it can be studied without a sense of combat. His face made her feel older and it made her protective towards him and it made her feel powerful. All the General Manager's potency had gone from his face. She was his own age and standing; she could never boss him or take advantage of him even now, but a sense of authority equal to his own lurked in her. With a decisive movement she got up to go, shook herself and, carefully, went down the ladder. In the house she looked at the date on the calendar hanging under an oleograph of one of Wales's most famous chapel preachers, and went up to her room, locking herself in. The muslin dress was full of little bits of hay.

That evening Mr. Dai played the piano on the landing and sang a great deal, touching top C once with fair ease. He knew many of the old airs of the country. Mari, who had enjoyed the circus, hummed and joined in some of the songs in the kitchen, from where the piano could be plainly heard. Eva sat shelling peas.

"What's the matter with you?" Mari asked, running to the pans and dishes. "So quiet! You're going exactly like Martin."

"I'm listening to the music," Eva said sedately. "When I was younger I thought I'd be a singer myself."

Mari glanced at her. "Seventy or seventeen you are?" She took out of the oven a tin-full of cherry tartlets, made of her wonderfully light pastry, removed one, put it on a beautiful Nantgarw plate, and brought it to Eva. "There! . . . And—mind you don't tell—Martin is carving one of his best spoons for you. What he could get ten shillings for in Carmarthen. A present."

"Did Mr. Dai order it?"

Mari did not reply and drew her attention to more important kitchen matters. Spoons such as Martin carved were usually given as love tokens from a man to a woman.

Before Mr. Dai left at the end of his week's holiday, as they sat by the trout stream, he said: "Now, Eva, I am going to see your mother about your sister Linda. When she is ready Linda must go to training college without worry. We need more school teachers in Bylau; it's best for us to have our own boys and girls for them. There are plans for a new school up on Cambrian Hill, away from the coal dust. Very healthy up there."

"A long climb," she said dubiously. "You ought to take the trams up there."

"Aye," he brooded, "you're right."

"Then there's the rickety old Swallows bridge over the river," she began, concentrating hard on remembering picked-up Bylau complaints—"the women over there grumble about the long walk to the shops, especially on wet days. Why can't the council build a fine new bridge below the common

and take the trams over it? You don't study women. Only the men."

"My wife Clara," he said, without criticism, "studies the women's cause enough for one house. When she's elected—and if—*she* will set the council on the boil." At the mention of his wife Eva sat back contracted like a girl remembering her place, and Mr. Dai resumed: "Soon as your sister Linda passes her exams I will see she will get a post in the new school. No need for your mother to save your wages. You must put them by in the Post Office savings bank yourself. I will open the account for you in Carmarthen before I go tomorrow."

CHAPTER THREE

RAIN FELL AGAIN that evening. Linda lit a fire in the sitting-room to offset the dank gloom. Gloom indeed threatened to envelop Eva completely. She had come back from the cemetery that morning looking oppressed and, yes, wilted. What *was* the matter with her?

Philip was out at a Masonic dinner in Cardiff. After a rather silent meal the sisters sat before the fire under the portrait of Mr. Dai which had caused the rumpus yesterday. Linda busily occupied herself with sewing repairs on her son's linen. Eva, sitting smoking cigarettes, seemed contrastingly a drone. They might have been a salutary subject for an embroidery on an old sampler.

"It's wonderful," Linda attempted another theme as she stitched away, "how you always just escape being stout, Eva. It has threatened you so often. You've lost quite a lot of weight since you were here last." She had taken particular care over the evening meal, but Eva had eaten little and indifferently.

Eva did not deign to reply to this. But she lifted her head. That familiar battling poise of her head still arrested with its air of racial distinction. Linda went on, a little louder: "You are pondering so much, Eva! It's coming out heavily under your chin."

"Is it absolutely necessary for me to talk?"

"Well, no, but it would be pleasanter." Linda stitched away. "I suppose you put that bunch of flowers on Mr. Dai's tomb this morning?" she encouraged, though for her the entire subject of the deceased was preferably buried too.

"No, I laid it on Elwyn Hughes's grave."

Linda stopped sewing. "Elwyn Hughes! . . . Oh, I had forgotten about him! Poor, poor Elwyn. He was very fond of you, wasn't he?"

"Yes; too fond." Her brow, palely clear under the fleece of dark curls, frowned. She was squirming inside.

"Do you think he died because of you?" Linda asked, grey eyes lucid.

"What d'you mean—'because of you'?" her sister demanded.

"Well, for love of you, of course." Linda replied, after a judicious pause.

"Men seldom, or never, die of love alone. It was consumption complicated by silicosis, as you know very well."

"Do I? It was such a long time ago . . . I was sure it was Mr. Dai's tomb you were visiting, especially as you made such a fuss about that painting yesterday. And this morning you mentioned the Institute foundation stone you laid."

Eva looked at her. Linda's quality of secure candour did not include an apparent malice, and though it was true about the mention of the stone that morning, she knew that any reference to it also brought up the scandal of the word chalked above Eva's name on foundation night. It was not for Linda to refer to the subject; and the word ought not to be in her vocabulary. For a moment Eva,

smouldering, seemed about to take offence. But her hand made a gesture of dismissal and her head sank back on the cushion which Linda had placed devotedly above the chair. ("Look, you've got to relax while you're here; you're worn out, dear.") She relapsed into silence. The ticking of the hall grandfather clock, placid but portentous, could be heard.

"Do you want anything, Eva?"

"Quiet."

"I meant something to drink. I told you Philip has got them all in the cabinet, for the men that come visiting from the laboratories."

"You'll be glad to know at least I haven't taken to drink." This was promising. As usual, Eva's displeasure did not last long. Linda's practical attentions for her comfort were touching—hadn't she fled down here for just such domestic felicities? After a minute or two, she resumed: "I did intend the flowers for Mr. Dai, but when I got to the cemetery the memory of Elwyn, for some reason, became stronger."

"A pity you didn't take two bunches, then."

Ignoring this, Eva proceeded: "People thought Mr. Dai was the one man in my life down here, but Elwyn was the real and true one; the first . . . really. I can see that now. I loved him."

"You mean . . . the *first* . . ." Linda bent lower over her sewing.

"No, not that. Mr. Dai was the first in that. So he had a hold over me, as the first does usually, if only in memory."

"You had a hold over Mr. Dai too, surely? No one can say you didn't do well."

"Your mind runs on material things." Eva spoke with patience. "I was thinking of what goes on inside one. I was a simple girl, and very humble; I had a servant mentality, really—owing, I suppose, to the conditions we were brought up in. I was flattered the General Manager chose me."

"Servant mentality, indeed! No! You were just nice. Nice and generous to a fault. Often I've said to Philip that you ought to have been christened Eva Generous, not Eva Sharon. Besides," Linda added, a new note of supremacy in her voice, "you were a beauty. Servant girl, indeed! Why, when you walked in the main streets people got out of your way and stopped to look."

Eva appeared to be listening exclusively to the splashing rain. Rummaging for a thimble, her sister went on: "Oh! do you remember when Mr. Dai bought the villa up on the Cambrian, after you decided you couldn't go on living under the same roof as him. He came to Pleasant View with the deeds for you, you remember? He arrived in his first motor-car, wore goggles, and carried a brace of partridge. Mam was so overcome she didn't know what to say. 'The partridges will have to be plucked,' she kept on repeating. I remember the high colour in her cheeks. The villa business was altogether too big for her to take; it passed over her head."

"Mam seemed confused about it all," Eva said sombrely. "Or she didn't want to see?"

"She was always unworldly. She wasn't one to think or talk—and, anyhow, in those days people didn't talk about *that* subject, did they? She used to tell me you got your unusual nature from your

father . . . and there wasn't blame in the way she said it. And I remember when Mr. Dai gave you the Cambrian villa she said: 'I expect he thinks Eva is too old for him to adopt her properly as his daughter; it wouldn't look the thing.' Besides, I had got my first teaching job by then, you remember, and that made her feel all was well, especially as I had passed my exams with honours . . . Mam could be called a weak woman, I suppose," Linda finished, cloudily.

"She was never comfortable in the Cambrian villa," Eva mused. "She blamed its draughtiness on those heights. And she would seldom go down into Bylau."

Linda said, carefully cheerful: "You needn't grieve. Mam enjoyed the last part of her life fairly reasonably; what had gone before made that logical. Remember how she loved the gramophone with the big horn that arrived on your birthday, especially the Caruso and Melba records? After all, I saw more of her than you, since you were up in Mr. Dai's house such a lot. All the same, I believe she thought you should have stayed in hiding at the Carmarthen farm and not come back to Bylau."

"After Mr. Dai's wife decided to settle in London," Eva said, shortly, "he needed me in Bylau. And so did Elwyn."

Linda looked up. "You didn't see much of that poor boy, surely?"

"I used to go and see him once a week at his home during the months before he died. On Wednesday nights, I remember. He never lacked for anything. Mr. Dai knew I was seeing him; he encouraged it. The silicosis, as we know it now,

developed in his pits, of course. If Elwyn hadn't been a hopeless case he would have been sent to Switzerland at Mr. Dai's expense."

"That would have caused talk! He wasn't the only silicosis case in Mr. Dai's pits."

"And Mr. Dai's pocket was no more bottomless than his pits. One helps the people that are most implicated in one's life."

Linda paused again. She closed one eye to get thread through the needle. "What a man, Mr. Dai! He was the last of the old type of boss. I can't imagine the men on the National Coal Board behaving like he did. A despot, that's what he was. Imitating the old race of rulers, interfering in people's private lives, helping himself to fresh women, like those rights exercised by old squires, even keeping a court jester—remember Mr. Luther Parry?"

"A poet, not a jester. I never found Luther Parry amusing and always felt sorry for his poor wife. He had small regard for women or men, only for himself. He ought to have been on the stage."

"You wanted to be on the stage yourself at one time, Eva."

"Well, I did become a kind of actress, I suppose."

"You always lacked true ambition, Eva. You were a soft woman." Linda made it sound like a cushion and at once struck a sharper note. "Though, of course, a highly-sexed one."

"Linda, you're not the sort of person that can say 'highly-sexed' properly. You make it sound depraved or like a mania extravagantly uncontrolled."

"Oh dear!" Linda almost allowed herself a

titter. She resumed, admittingly: "It was strange that no one in Bylau except those hot-headed fanatics disliked you—and even they only used you as a social whipping-block. Yes, strange—since you always seemed to be enjoying yourself. I suppose you just had that born niceness inside you all the time, and it gave off—let me think . . . yes, a *glow*. Even some of the religious ones used to smile when your name was mentioned. Is it because people like to see at least one person around who hasn't . . . well, obeyed what's usual and proper in life?"

Eva smiled, vaguely, but as if pleased. Then she quickly lifted her head—Linda noticed it—and listened intently. From across the river came the sound of the nine-forty-five train rolling into Bylau station. After a while, she observed, subsidingly: "Besides being flattered when Mr. Dai took me up, I never could think that what I gave him was so important. I couldn't help myself. I loved men."

It did not sound like an apologia. contrition, or a visitation of qualms. Yet surely some process of shriving was going on? What was the matter? Was she in the clutches of somebody, or something, awful? Once more Linda became conscious of the contrast between the young exuberant Eva, revived in these halting fireside memories, and this brooding woman who seemed involved in some dark dilemma. It was surely more than a question of maturing age. Linda stitched on.

"Of course," she proceeded, as I said, people in those days didn't talk publicly about the question of sex. They worked the business out for themselves in the privacy of their own selves. You were an

ignorant girl burdened with innocent generosity. Luckily," she added, sounding less the schoolmistress and more the secure and candid sister, "it was Mr. Dai who took advantage of your innocence and not some worthless scamp." She said nothing of the subsequent others; it was a subject of which she knew little, only aware of names and random bits of information dropped over the years by Eva.

Eva, who had lowered her eyelids at the phrase 'worthless scamp', smiled again. "Nowadays we've got sex cut and dried and safely mastered?"

"There's more discipline about it now." Linda parried. "And I should think it causes less suffering."

"Perhaps," Eva murmured. "Perhaps not."

She looked at Linda for a moment as if at a stranger. Never one to let an old undergarment go, Linda was now repairing an old singlet belonging to Llewellyn, ready for the parcel tomorrow: his mother insisted that he post his laundry home every week from the college hostel, thus saving two or three shillings.

"*Must* you darn those things?"

"It gives me pleasure. Llewellyn grumbles, but very good-temperedly. Oh, he's become so attractive, Eva! Good things just radiate from him. I often see a lot of you in him. . . . By the way, he asked me in one of his letters when you were coming to see us again; he hoped you'd come during his next vacation." Linda dotingly cut a thread with her teeth.

"Would you like to send him this sweater in the parcel tomorrow?" She was wearing the black

sweater. When she had appeared in it that evening, Linda had said, surprised: "It's a man's!" The coarse but costly garment did not fit or suit Eva, who said it had belonged to a friend. Somehow, indeed, the sweater suggested an impregnation of its former owner.

"Why, Llewellyn would love the sweater, even if it will be second-hand. Did you bring it down for him?"

"No. But I want to get rid of it."

Linda, stitching, said: "Eva, you sound as though you want to get rid of a lot of things. It's like people beginning to talk of making their wills. You, so careless of such matters!"

"I'm not really careless of them. After all, my money is in sound investments."

"Because," Linda recalled one of the bits of information, "someone in the know did all that for you——"

But Eva was rising rapidly from her chair, her face pale; for a moment she seemed about to dash from the room. A loud banging of the front door knocker had sounded, peremptory, a banging of character. Linda dropped her sewing, stared at Eva, but herself was not incommoded. "It can't be Philip," she said, "it's too early, and he's got his key. Why, what's the matter, Eva? Sit down, dear."

"Who is it?" Eva quickly crossed the room.

"I must go and see," Linda said, calmly considering as she rose.

"If it's anyone for me, say I'm not here! Say I went back to London this morning. On no account let him in."

"I expect it's Mary Edwards," Linda said, as if

only then knowing it. "She said she might drop in after the Guild meeting."

"At this time of night? Here!" Eva meant with the house beyond a deserted common.

"It's only just after ten! . . . And Mary was an air-raid warden during the war." By then they were in the hall. Eva ran upstairs. People travelling by the evening train from London arrived at Bylau station with the nine-forty-five connection.

It was Mary Edwards. But Eva did not come down. Linda got rid of the caller in record time, half an hour, went upstairs, and cautiously opened the door of Eva's room. It was in darkness, but she could see the shape on the bed. "Are you asleep?" she whispered, knowing by the electrical quality of the air that Eva was very much awake.

"Don't switch the light on."

There was no encouragement to stay. Linda hesitated. "Are you coming down? Philip ought to be here about eleven o'clock and we generally have a gossip after these banquets."

"No; I'd rather go to bed now."

"You're not frightened of anything, are you?"

"Oh, for God's sake leave me alone. Don't fuss."

"All right. I won't offer to make you a cup of tea. Run down to the kitchen if you want it; I won't be there. The best tea is in the blue caddy. You've got aspirin?"

At least she vanished with creditable quietude. Presently Eva got off the bed and switched on the light. Nothing worse than to collapse on a bed when that thing gripped her.

She looked in the mirror. Extraordinary how nothing showed in her face: one would have

thought such torment would display evidence of ravage. She sat down and lit a cigarette, sagging in the chair like a person released from inquisition. But sleep would not come easily tonight. Dr. Kirsten had given her some pellets in London. Abounding with bodily health all her life, she had always an aversion to drugs and medicines, and these granules, by their very tinyness and colour, particularly repelled her. She began to wander round the room, looking for some task, determined not to go downstairs and be forced to avoid Linda's steadily not-inquisitive grey eyes.

The room, chaste and burnished, had always been kept ready for her. In the pale-painted cupboards flanking the fireplace many old possessions associated with the district remained stored. Where was that Crown Derby teapot she had always intended taking to London? For some reason she also remembered the gold-rimmed miniature of Tudor Quarter Sessions (as the over-ripe judge who had tried to climb one night into her bed at Mr. Dai's house, was called): unlike its subject, it was a beautiful piece of work and could join the two miniatures she had picked up in a London antique shop.

Rummaging on the shelves of the cupboards, she found the judge in a cardboard shoe-box and smelt port-wine again. The teapot could not be found: Linda had always cast her straightforward eyes on it. But she discovered the wooden spoon, token of love, carved for her by The Thinker to Mr. Dai's order. A booklet of Papier Poudré still gave off a sweet-pea scent. The suède-bound Omar Khayyam, a present from Linda, bore a fly-leaf Christmas date

which brought up another sigh. She rapidly flicked over a heap of photographs taken from an old chocolate box. Yes, it was among them.

She placed the stiff card on the dressing-table and sat down. It was a cheap photograph of a young man. She gazed at it intently. Not that she had ever really forgotten what he looked like. But had she ever thought clearly what he had meant to her? Because of his illness everything connected with him had been so emotional. One cannot match one's power against that of death in another person; one has to stand aside and only watch, like an anxious second in a duel.

What had he meant to her as she stood aside wringing her hands? She sat looking at that dead face, solidly lifeless as such photographed faces of the period were, and then she knew that this simple, ordinary young man had brought her to a realisation. Or was it that the death within him, which she had embraced, halted and warned her? She remembered now—oh! with such particular clarity —that first Wednesday night when she went to visit him. Time, and all that had happened since his death, made him seem remote only superficially.

CHAPTER FOUR

MR. DAI had said to her: "The report on that young man of yours is not good; it came in today from Dr. Watkins. Hundred per cent consumption."

"He ought never to have gone down the pits," she said at once, repeating her mother's words of eighteen months ago, when Elwyn had first tried to court her.

"No." Mr. Dai agreed, the uneasy, even guilty, look on his face which came whenever one of his employees suffered disaster. "But they do."

"Will the company give him compensation?"

"I doubt it. It can't be proved that the pits caused the consumption. There's a family history of it. His father died young."

"But the pits have shortened his life?" Her attention was really on the thought of Elwyn in connection with herself. She would go down to see him that evening.

"We don't force them to come in," Mr. Dai said, wearily shifting the peak of his cap.

"Can't he go somewhere?"

"I've gone into that with Watkins. His case is hopeless. He could go to a sanatorium for a while; or I could get him into St. Teilo's rest home. But it won't make much difference."

"Not Switzerland? Rich people go there for consumption, don't they?"

Mr. Dai paused, staring at some papers on the desk, where the white cat sat in splendid calm. He was a stranger when in this pause of thought: no one, nothing, could touch him then, not criticism, scandal, love, praise. She liked and respected him most when he was like that. "Switzerland won't cure him either," he said at last. "But he could go there if he wants to. Do you want to go with him?" He looked at her.

She was startled. This kindness was big even for Mr. Dai. Such an expense would have to come out of his private pocket, of course, unless he managed to persuade the Bylau Colliery Company to grant a lump sum in compensation money. So far, miners got money for lost limbs but not for ruined lungs.

"He could go there himself——" she said doubtfully.

His brow cleared. "Ask him if he wants to go. I daresay it can be arranged. But it won't be much good."

"No," she said, knowing it somehow.

"Eva," he asked, as she sat looking at her shoe, "would you have married this boy, if things hadn't happened as they've done—with me, I mean?"

She pondered, and replied: "How can I tell? Things happen."

"Well," he pursued, almost irritably, "are you, or were you, in love with him?"

She hesitated. "I don't know, Mr. Dai. I liked being with him, and when he used to turn up at the farm for a day I enjoyed it very much—especially when he came without warning me, just knocking at the door and standing there

smiling——" But those smiles! Not really smiles, she thought.

"Did he talk about me?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

She was silent. He did not press the point. In any case, it was six o'clock and already somebody could be heard arriving in the hall, admitted by Mrs. Naunton. The Old Turk was receiving his people in audience as usual. Leaving Mr. Dai's room by the door which led into the sitting-room, she went up the back staircase, avoiding the kitchen. Mrs. Naunton, the new housekeeper, always wanted to delay her in confederational whispering. After Mr. Dai's wife had decided to live permanently in London and devote herself entirely to social and other causes, there had been changes in the house. The two young maids had been dismissed, and Mrs. Naunton, respectful as a starched apron, ran the house with a handy-man who had lost a leg in No. 1 pit, and been given an artificial one by Mr. Dai. A couple of months after this new regime began, Eva had moved into residence. Ostensibly her position in Nantcellan was as second-in-command to Mrs. Naunton. But in Bylau, as she knew, it was whispered that Mrs. Dai had decided to separate from her husband, amicably, because of his full-time absorption in Eva: Mrs. Dai had philosophy, besides money, to uphold her.

After her return to Bylau from the Carmarthen farm Eva found herself, almost at one bound, transferred to the domain of myth suggestive of the mysterious isolation of the harem. When she walked in the streets—which became less and less

often—old school friends and people who knew her stopped to speak and treated her with respect. There were no remarks or questions applicable to her new status. She was the favourite of Mr. Dai, taken under his royal wing, practically adopted by him: after all, no one had actually seen them in bed together. A diaphanous mist of tact hung about the favourite. Mr. Dai, a deacon of Noddfa, could still walk to his place on the Big Seat below the pulpit without a breath of rebuke evident. True, there were one or two mutterings in obscure corners of the town, from new agitators who did not keep their protests applied to matters of work in the colliery. But as yet these had no real power in happy Bylau, where tradition, because of the unusual long reign of prosperity, still ruled.

In her room Eva wondered what she could take Elwyn for a present. There was nothing suitable except a stereoscope with pictures of foreign places. She looked in her silver mesh bag; it contained six pounds. She changed into a quiet dark coat and skirt. Mr. Dai had taken her to London for three days before the move from the farm and given her money for clothes: they were the happiest days of her life and she hadn't wanted to come back. Couldn't she live in London, with Mr. Dai coming up often? For once he had lost his temper and said: "Certainly not." It was on this occasion she realised she had become necessary to him and could never leave him now, barring something extraordinary happening.

The October evening was smoky. From her window Bylau, lying in its hollow under the dark hills, looked like a bowl of thick meaty soup. Wrap-

ping up the stereoscope, with its slides of Venice and Rome, she left the house by a side door and in a few minutes reached the main road which led away from the colliery. It was not yet dark. When, at the slope's bottom, the houses began, she wished she was old enough to wear a veil, a thick black-spotted veil such as settled women wore. People looked at her, and one or two nodded, but she was separate from them. She passed the turning leading to the terrace where her mother lived. No time to drop in this evening. And Linda's wide eyes would, as usual, stare at her clothes and she would ask awkward questions about the domestic work at Nantcellan. Linda was already displaying superiority, knowing her school-teacher destiny.

Under a low garden wall, above which soared a brilliance of dahlias, sunflowers and Michaelmas daisies, squatted Octi the idiot. As she approached he called out: "Going for a walk?" He spoke, always with civility, to everybody, but with that same drooling simper which seemed to expose one. He had a habit of stealing washing off people's garden lines, but everybody knew about it, and the robbed women only went to his home to collect the articles. She did not reply, of course, for a general anonymity surrounded Octi's greetings and presence. Tonight something unusual about her must have caught his attention, for as she passed he bawled: "Come for a walk with *me*? Got a shilling. Ice-cream." And, surprisingly, he sniggered through his nose.

She walked on with stiffened back. No one else was about. What had given her a jolt was that Octi had stepped out of his range, as if a goat had put

out a hoof to shake hands with her. She walked on with dignity. Perhaps it had been a mistake to sprinkle on her dress a few drops of the scent bought in London: scent was seldom used in Bylau.

Morien Terrace was a row of dwellings facing a slope of hillside covered with pigeoncotes, chicken sheds and vegetable patches. After she had rapped on the door of Number 8 it was opened by a short, brawny-shouldered young man. "Oh," he said, blinking, "it's you. Come in. Elwyn's mother has gone to Merthyr to see her sister and I'm keeping him company. Nice evening!" he added, regaining a cockiness of the streets. "Haven't seen you about for a long time, Eva."

He was Dan Pugh, a pit crony of Elwyn. She followed him up the narrow linoleumed stairs, across three yards of landing, and into a small front room which seemed all dusky bed. Bright-eyed even in the fading light, Elwyn sat up in bed and smiled dazzlingly. Her heart lurched at the forgiving smile.

"Where you going to sit?" he breathed excitedly. "On the bed? That chair's rickety."

"It will hold me." She sat beside the high, valanced bed, a family bed of Victorian vintage. Dan squatted on the bed; his heavy physical presence, swart and footballer, made Elwyn look even more ethereal than he really was. It was the enormous eyes that betrayed his condition. A strange beauty had become manifest in his face. For a few seconds she could not bear to look at him. Dan Pugh babbled something about 'the other boys' perhaps coming up to keep company later on, after a meeting about football fixtures in the White

Hart. Elwyn told him he ought to be at the meeting, but Dan seemed not to hear this hint. His gaze came more rigidly towards Eva.

"I brought this," she said. "Thought it would amuse you."

The gas was lit for an examination of the stereoscope, which at last Elwyn laid down, saying gravely: "Dan, you better go to the meeting now. Eva will stay with me till Mam comes home." He added punctiliously: "Though I don't know what's this stuff about always having someone with me."

"It's for company," said Dan, who had reddened. He stared with ferocious intensity at Elwyn. "I was going to say I'll fetch something to drink from the White Hart and the three of us can sit here with a quiet drink, see!"

"No," Elwyn said, steelily tranquil, the boss invalid. "Come tomorrow night, Dan. Bring the boys then." He seemed to be wearing an old-fashioned nightshirt, a big-buttoned woman's pink cardigan thrown over his shoulders. His hands on the quilt were long and slender; even less than before, they were not a miner's hands. She was still confused by his metamorphosis; she hadn't seen him for three months. This attack which had brought him to bed developed after his last visit to the Carmarthen farm. He had cycled there one wet Sunday. She remembered how he sat shivering by the kitchen fire, while Mari clucked over him and lent him clothes of The Thinker while his own dried.

At last Dan got off the bed, glowering, not at Eva or Elwyn, but from whatever frustrated intention rankled in his heavy-weight flesh. "See you to-

morrow night, then, El," he said hoarsely, entreatingly, with passion that was not focused. He went downstairs, ignoring Eva. The front door slammed.

Elwyn looked at her in silence. The detachment in his eyes bothered her. She was being judged, not with hostility or contempt, but in acceptance of her behaviour. She had made her choice more definite by coming back to Bylau and living at Nantcellan House: the act was done. He accepted loss of her as he accepted the circumstances of his birth and the fact of this inheritance of disease.

"Mr. Dai asked me today," she said, "if you would like to go to Switzerland."

"What the hell do I want to go to Switzerland for?" He spoke in a mild, discussive way. "Tell Mr. Dai to stick Switzerland up where it'll hurt him most."

"Now, Elwyn——" she pleaded, threatened by a burning pity, by the danger of being at the mercy of a dangerous emotion, by a terrible bout of tears.

"I've got this bloody thing and it can't be helped. But I tell you what you can do——" He smiled to himself as at some vision, rare and devious. It was surprising how vital he seemed, as though he had had a long, refreshing sleep deep among fragrant roots of the earth. Again she thought he looked beautiful, there in bed, removed to a kingdom freed of routine, customs, work, ordinary habits of act and speech.

"Well, what can I do?" she asked, since he paused.

"I'll tell you in a minute." Then he said: "When I tried to court you did you know I had this consumption?"

"No. . . . At least," she struggled to express her thought, "I didn't know in my *head*."

"You preferred Mr. Dai, then?"

"I didn't prefer anyone," she protested, unable to express the thought that what she wanted was to plunge into an abundance of life, to enjoy herself, to retreat from bleakness and the tints of working-class life in Bylau.

"You don't know your own mind," he said, still mildly, without rebuke. He looked at her as though absorbed in another matter, of more importance just then, and she knew what he was going to ask her. "If you weren't so nice you'd be a little bitch."

"I loved you," she said, clearly. "And I love you now. But all the time I knew it wasn't to be. I don't want to stay in Bylau always, be a miner's wife, sit down to the life here . . . I haven't got a strong character," she said, shaking her head. "Perhaps I'm nasty . . . but not a bitch," she added thoughtfully. And, slowly, she removed her hat and placed it on her lap. She thought of the six pounds in the bag: after his reception of the Switzerland suggestion it would be difficult to give him money, sensible and particularly necessary in this case though such a gift could be.

"Undress and come into bed with me."

"Is it safe?" she quavered, gazing as if weighingly at the huge bed.

"Mam won't be back till eleven. The boys won't come now. Go and bolt the front door, if you like —but better not, in case someone comes: it would look funny, a bolted door."

"Funnier still if someone *does* come up——"

"You could go under the bed till they'd gone.

Only a po there, and the valance will hide you. But no one will come. The Morrises next door have gone to the concert in Salem chapel. Dan is supposed to be with me. Don't waste time. Take them all off."

She put out the gas. Through the Nottingham lace curtains came the pale yellow of a street lamp just below. As a precaution, and with qualms, she folded all her clothes in a neat heap beside the valance, so that they could be swept quickly under the bed; shoes, hat, bag and umbrella were laid on the top. Pausing beside the bed, she thought too of consumption; what one had heard about the danger of catching it. As she was about to step into the bed, he said, commandingly: "Stand back a minute. Against the wall." He gazed at her in the secret light coming from outside.

"I can do the splits," she said, feeling exposed, wanting to distract him. And slowly she slid down to the linoleum, accomplishing the descent as she had seen it done in a music-hall. She did not rise as gracefully. He threw back a fold of the bedcovers and opened his arms. She went with a lithe bound into them. The bed creaked like an old farm cart. "Take off your things," she whispered, and pulled at them, helping him.

"Love me!" he commanded.

The sternness in his voice, and in his grip, made something in her pause. It was as though the texture of her memory was receiving these moments for never-to-be-forgotten storage. Then she thrust him down into the billowy feather mattress, and gave his slender body, that was about to die, tribute with her hands, mouth, words. This was her man.

When he thrust her down, and she exclaimed in her throat, he made a sound like triumph: he seemed to know her thought.

The body was nothing. When they lay still she was preoccupied by that. The body sank away like this, like hers and his, and could no longer feel. No one could be held for long. What had just happened was not of great importance. A strangely elusive taste of bitterness haunted her. Grip had left his arms; he lay in true silence. She wondered if she had done wrong. Yet she wanted to be there all night beside him like this, in a relaxation that gradually began to hold less of the silence of nothingness. She became drowsy. Distantly she heard a faint tapping sound, from another world, obscurely warning, a ghostly tapping at the back of her skull . . . and, with a bound, full consciousness came back.

"There's someone knocking! Someone is knocking. Elwyn!" She shook him. But he was awake.

"I bet it's Pardoe. He's the only one that comes after dark, as a rule."

"Pardoe?" She was still in a stupor, but ready to leap out of bed. "Who's Pardoe?"

"One of my pigeons." His arm stayed her with almost the same surprisingly stern grip. "Very intelligent. I got a cote opposite on the slope, and they come to the window-sill and tap to see me. . . . And for corn," he added, luxuriantly pulling her down into the feather mattress. "He'll go away."

"Elwyn! No. Not again." Panic had not yet left her.

"Yes. Won't be another chance like this perhaps for a long time." And he pushed her down with a

strength that had passed from sternness into something else: a cruelty. He muttered words which she knew but had never used herself, and would never use. She heard the soft flap of the pigeon winging away. For a moment or two she thought, frantically, that he intended bragging about all this to 'the boys'. As a punishment of her? She knew by hearsay how the men in the pits talked among themselves, especially the young unmarried ones, boasting and derisive. A vengeful jeering of women possessed them. What had happened tonight would be all over the pits in a few days! Mr. Dai would be laughed at. . . . She gave up. She lay still.

"I hope you get a baby by me," he whispered in her ear.

She said nothing. The last shred of her old self had fled at last. She didn't care what they said. In this last abandonment she knew she had changed her life for ever. When he gently kissed her she wanted to cry, long and whole-heartedly. But she worked herself out of his vague embrace. He dropped back and paid no further attention to her. Then, as she hurriedly dressed, she was frightened of something else—that this tonight had been bad for his condition.

She called: "Elwyn, Elwyn! Put your things on."

He woke slowly. She helped him into the striped nightshirt, buttoned his mother's pink cardigan round the thin shoulders. He did not cough. Drowsily he watched her light the gas, tidy the bed. She wanted to wash him, bring him food, discuss household affairs with him. But, tasks done, she sat on the insecure chair against the wall. Tonight's diagram of what their future life might have been

haunted her mind. He was inside her now, but not finally. It couldn't be.

His gaze steadied. He looked at her and smiled, a wicked smile which again made her suspicious of his tongue exercised in the insulting comradeship of the pits. "Funny, I feel right as rain," he said. "You're a good girl, Eva. You'll go to Heaven. Don't sit there. Sit here on the bed and let me breathe you in." Tribute in his appeased eye, he looked very young and idle. She was ashamed of her unworthy suspicion. "That was the first time," he said. Her smile was even more secret than his. "Glad it was with you. I kept on thinking of it with you. It was better than I thought." He lay relaxed. The blue shadowiness under the exaggerated eyes made her heart beat, and her own eyes seemed to grow heavy in unison, as the stricken flavour of his flesh was in her flesh too.

"You must eat," she worried. "Eat plenty. Can't I get you something now? Is there any brandy—shall I run and get you some from the White Hart? A drop in a beaten egg——"

"No. Be quiet now. Mam will bring me milk when she comes in. Or broth, it will be."

"Look," she said, abolishing all doubts. "I brought six pounds. I saved them for you. Illness is costly."

She nearly burst into tears, of love and relief, when he said: "I don't mind taking his money, now. But I'm not going to Switzerland, see! . . . Unless," he added, amused, "I can take Dan Pugh and Matt Grownw with me for company. Tell Mr. Dia that! We play cards a lot, and Dan behaves like a sweetheart with me."

"Mr. Dai asked me if I wanted to go with you to Switzerland."

"Good God!" he exclaimed, and, in severe judgment: "No. It wouldn't be proper. Switzerland! Mam would have a fit and go to see the chapel minister about it."

The Switzerland idea, indeed, seemed altogether outlandish. She was ready to abide by his decision. "I better go now," she said, after giving him the money. She did not want to meet his mother, a strident chapel woman who enjoyed nothing more than what she called a 'clonk', talking until everybody was turned inside out. "You'll be all right and go to sleep?"

"Aye." He was ready for sleep. "When are you coming again? Mam always takes Wednesday evenings off. . . ." His lids drifted down. "The boys come in but they can go——"

"I'll try to come down Wednesday of next week."

"Wednesday . . ." he breathed.

"Sleep . . ." she whispered.

"Aye."

She lowered the gas to a glimmer, stood looking at the ghostly face for a while, and crept downstairs. Outside, no one was about. The sky had cleared and stars glittered fresh. As she hesitated in the lamplight she thought she caught a glimpse of a figure hastily disappearing behind one of the sheds on the rough slope directly opposite the house. Dan Pugh keeping watch? Someone else spying? What did it matter now? Nothing of all that mattered. The watching figure could have stoned her for all she cared. She went into the main road without guilt or fear.

The front of Nantcellan lay in darkness. She hoped Mr. Dai had been called out on business. But when she went in by the hooded front porch she saw a light under his back room door. Luther Parry's voice came from inside. As she hesitated at the door the slobbering bulldog walked from his kennel under the hall mantelpiece and fell thumpingly against the door. In a moment it opened. She stood helplessly in the blaze mercilessly striking her.

"Eva!" Luther Parry kissed her and smacked her behind. "Come in, girl. You look surprised as a sea-lion on a bicycle."

At the fireside Mr. Dai sat with feet up, cap on head, a glass of blackcurrant brew beside him. Sheets of paper lay scattered on the hearthrug. Luther Parry was at his poems again. Mr. Dai never read a book, but often adjudicated or had patron's dealings at both the literary and musical sections of local eisteddfods, and he took pride that a poet was born and bred in Bylau.

"How did you find him, Eva?" he asked.

She shook her head, but smiled, sitting like a caller on business. Luther Parry, who had shaky shanks, a jingling voice like horses' accoutrements, and a face ceaselessly jerking about, said: "What do you think of this, Eva? A sonnet." He read the poem, which dealt with the long-postponed birth of a child to the wife of one of Mr. Dai's overmen. Gloved hands in her lap, she said it was pretty. "Watts ordered it," Luther Parry said. "Half a guinea; frame not included."

"The line about the future of man is weak," Mr. Dai objected. "Men might be born equal, but they don't remain so. Babies are nobodies. You're not

taking up this new-fangled Communism, Luther?"

"A true poet's nose," Luther trotted, "has got to sniff the morning air."

Mr. Dai had become a bit touchy about this Communism. Luther himself had lately brought him the information that a 'study group', which carried Socialism further and called themselves Communists, met regularly in Bylau and that some mysterious man of fame had come down from London to address the group. Luther also reported it was rumoured in the town that Mrs. Dai, wayward daughter of a rich docksman and typifying the new kind of family black sheep, had herself gone astray from ordinary Socialism since living in London.

"You've clogged up your nose with too many different morning sniffs," Mr. Dai told his court poet.

Luther had a turncoat's reputation. He espoused any cause or craze which began to be talked about, at one time even going so far, when missionaries from Utah appeared in Bylau, as to preach Mormonism. "In man," he jingled now, collecting his papers from the rug, "is an ineradicable need to burst out every now and then. Life doesn't stand still." His turncoating was often advantageous to his patron, who learned of many a little cell of Bylau rebellion and hostility, with names named, from the roving poet.

Mr. Dai yawned; up at five, his day had been a long one. He looked speculatively at Eva. The gross bulldog lay beside his chair in elephantine sleep. "What's that young chap Luke Powell up to?" he asked.

"Luke? He holds meetings on the Coity Inn corner on Friday nights. Spouts like a drain-pipe. A lot of it with double meaning."

"Names mentioned?"

"No. Only nick descriptions." Not without vanity, Luther added: "Jack Williams told me he referred one Friday to a ram of a Bylau bard with a soft Tory backside and the tongue of a serpent. So I wrote a limerick about this Mr. Luke Powell and gave it to Jack to spread among the chaps in the pits." He repeated the limerick, which had to do with trouble in the bowel, and Mr. Dai chuckled and glanced at Eva, who pretended not to have listened. Luther proceeded: "I've heard he spouted something another time about Solomon and his concubines." He tidied the MS. sheets. "You don't like this 'Ode to Winter', then?"

When the poet had left, Mr. Dai looked at her thoughtfully as she sat there silent. "Did you mention about Switzerland to him?" he asked.

"Yes. He doesn't want to go there." After a pause, she said: "Mr. Dai, I went to bed with him."

For a while he said nothing. She kept her eyes on the snoozing bulldog. In a tone of ordinary curiosity, he asked: "Why?" and, as she did not reply, went on helpfully: "Because he's so ill? But was it wise? He asked you?"

"He asked me. But I wanted to go to bed with him. I don't know if it was wise. It made him happy. He enjoyed himself; I did too." She looked up. He was smiling and, in the same odd way, she found herself smiling too. Vainly trying to find something importantly true to say—a mysteriously impenetrable darkness wrapped the subject, but

she felt a need to express more than she could find to say—she went on helplessly: "But it was all very sad."

"You went with him because of pity?"

"Not all pity. I wanted him. . . . Before it was too late." The awkward smile stretched her lips again.

"You are in love with him, then?" He might have been asking at the pit offices how many wagons of coal had gone down the line today. She was glad and admiring, and again felt safe with this man, as she had when first she stood interviewed in this room with her mother. Coming up from Elwyn's she had wondered if Mr. Dai would turn her out. She knew she would have to tell him what she had done: for two reasons—that she did not want to be shifty about it, and that she wanted to be alone tonight.

"I don't know if I am in love with him. I told him I loved him. What is the use of being in love with a man in that state? I don't want to be in love with a man I would weep over every day." She seemed about to weep now.

"You're a true daughter of Bylau, Eva. People here can't afford to be soft . . . Mrs. Dai," he said, shifting the peak of his cap as though in politeness, "was right when she said children born here are conditioned by the circumstances. They grow up not hard but clear-eyed."

"You don't mind that I went to bed with him?"

His hesitation before replying pleased her. "I want you to be happy. This house is not a prison. But you must take care." He stroked the cat, which had jumped on his knee. "The understanding

between two people can be spoilt in two ways—through the fault of one or both of the people not understanding enough, or from the mischief that can come from others . . . spite, malice, jealousy of persons pretending to preach about wickedness. What matters, Eva," he concluded, while the cat yawned, "is faith between two people. They must always stand guard over it."

She had listened carefully, and said: "People in Bylau are talking of you and me."

"In what way?"

"Making fun, I think."

He finished the blackcurrant brew. "Well, that's not so bad, and healthy. It *is* comic, you and me. A man my age dandling and doting on a girl like you is funny and daft. But there it is." A note of sing-song aggressiveness came into his voice: "Am I to go whimpering like a whipped little boy caught with his tongue in the jampot? No! I like young women, that come up fresh as a daisy, and I've liked a lot of them in my time. What's that chap's name Luther Parry told me about once?—Casanova?—well, I'm not like him, making a profession of it just for the bed. I'm more like King Solomon, that had a kingdom to rule and was wise and busy and needed his daisies."

She said vaguely: "You don't belong to today, I expect." She was thinking of the chapels and their teaching and power.

"Do you think Elwyn will tell his butties about what happened tonight?" he asked.

"No. But one was there when I arrived, and when I left I thought I saw a man dodge behind a shed opposite the house."

"It's you I'm thinking about. I am old and well-off and got power."

"I don't care," she said, looking across at him with deeper admiration. "Not now."

She wanted to go to bed. But there was one more think she had to say. Her mind made effort to find the right, not-hurting words. She said: "Oh . . . I'm so tired! I could sleep locked-up for two days."

"Yes, yes. Off to bed now. No one will disturb you. Sleep well, my girl."

She looked at him in gratitude. She saw his face, fiery-coloured yet clayey with years, grizzled and neither handsome nor ugly, only set in the dignity of a man emerged without mishap from the middle years. She was aware of the solidity of his ponderous body, that no longer could achieve the lovely mistakes or impudent antics of a young man. Strange (considering his reputation) that he was not a fiercely passionate man! She pondered as she sat, making no haste to go. Perhaps he worked too hard in the pits. Or was he for ever looking for something in a woman or girl that he could not find? Or, more simply, only wanting young company around him? A new access of devotion for him began to grow in her.

He suddenly chuckled. "Aren't you going?"

"It's nice sitting here with you. Don't you want to play the piano? Go on—take off your cap and touch the top C."

"It strains me. Not tonight, Eva. I got a letter to write to Mrs. Dai, too. She wants to turn the Carmarthen farm into a home for funny girls, or some such rubbish; she's got a new bee in the bonnet. Off with you now."

She kissed him. He moved to the desk with a gleam in his eye; he had recognised the arrival of that new devotion. The elderly bulldog rose and stood as though in acknowledgement, the white cat stretched paws and again showed her yawning mauve jaws. Going up to bed, she felt much older herself. And, undressing, she decided that since there was to be no Switzerland for Elwyn she must get the money in lieu. He must have roast and boiled chickens, best red meats, port wine and so on, every day. And at Christmas, three months hence, a big giant's stocking-full of everything.

CHAPTER FIVE

HEARING LINDA RETURN from the bathroom Eva opened the door and beckoned her in. Linda must have thought the headlong flight from downstairs, when the door-knocker banged, was very odd. An hour had passed. Eva had heard Philip arrive, and after that there was a period of heavy silence downstairs: she wondered, without caring much, if Linda had sat consulting Philip about her sister's peculiar conduct.

Readily stepping into the room, Linda gave a quick glance around as if expecting to see signs of material disorder after such a display. "Not gone to bed yet?" she said chattily, avoiding a scrutiny of Eva. "What have you been doing since you ran up?" She closed the door. "Philip is just coming up," she whispered, not without coyness. "He's a *little* drunk. Always the same after these banquets! Obstreperous, oh dear! But he'll sleep like a log after a while."

"I've been tidying the cupboards and looking for some old things. By the way, what has become of that Crown Derby teapot I left in them?"

"Oh! . . . to tell you the truth, I gave it as a wedding present to Polly Vaughan. All those years in the cupboard, I didn't think you'd ever want it."

"Or remember about it?" But she was too self-

rebuking about her earlier conduct to scold. "It was an antique."

Linda examined her face in the dressing-table glass and, hesitating with Eva's lipstick, said skittishly: "Polly appreciated that, of course. It was wonderful to see her getting married, at her age. Remember how that fellow from Risca shilly-shallied her for so long?" She picked up the stiff photograph from the dressing-table. "Who's this? . . . Elwyn Hughes, is it?"

Eva, a cigarette in her fingers, had sat down. "That is what I was really looking for in the cupboards, I suppose."

"Why are you dwelling so much on him now? You talked about him downstairs very feelingly. I never heard you mention him all the years since you left Bylau."

Eva lit the cigarette. "It's strange how a memory for some reason or other will come back, and one suddenly realises that what one has been . . . what one *is* . . . has been influenced by it—not really forgotten, of course." She seemed to be stumbling.

"Good gracious! Sounds rather far-fetched to me, Eva. And not at all like you. I always think you come up new every day and never know what a yesterday is. Due to having no responsibilities or worries, I've thought."

"No legal husband, no growing child?"

"No money anxieties, either," Linda parried. She laid the photograph down. "He was a nice-looking fellow. A pity about the consumption."

"He was the father of my child."

Linda swerved round in consternation. "What! You mean that miscarriage you had?"

"Yes. I told you downstairs I used to see him regularly at his home. His mother would go out—I think she half suspected the truth—and I would jump into bed with him, until he got too ill. He was doomed, but I wonder if I helped to shorten his life. I couldn't have enough of him—or he of me. I saw to it that he never lacked for anything. I remember his last Christmas——" She stopped, her face stiffened, and resumed: "Before then, I knew for certain I was pregnant by him."

"And we all thought it was Mr. Dai! Well!" Linda, herself dropping to a chair, had not found the proper attitude to adopt. "Did Mr. Dai know it wasn't him?"

"Yes; I told him."

"And he didn't get rid of you!" Linda stared. "He *ought* to have thrown you out. It would have been more complimentary to you. Well . . . !" And then, rapidly veering from the subject, she demanded: "What is upsetting you, Eva? Confessing like this!"

"Confessing? The wrong word. I'm not in the least on my knees, Linda."

Whistling like an errand-boy, Philip could be heard lumpily ascending the stairs. After a minute he bawled on the landing: "Where's everybody? Hey!" and thumped on Eva's door. "What's the matter? Eva! Linda!" Eva called to him and he bustled in. "What's up, a confab at this time of night?" He breathed masterfully. It was on Eva, idle in a cloudy blue wrap, his eyes remained. "You're looking like a film-star, Eva! All dollars and good old sex-appeal. Damn me, if you weren't my sister-in-law——"

"That will do, Phil," Linda said. "I can smell the drink from here. Go and gargle. You've locked up properly downstairs?"

"Phil wants to see Eva!" he burlesqued, not with much difficulty, a droolingly moony adolescent. "Let's all go downstairs and put the gramophone on and have a drink."

Linda, preparing to leave, picked up the sweater which Eva had offered for tomorrow's parcel for her son, considered its size and texture, dropped it back on the bed. "Don't talk nonsense, Phil. Eva has a bad headache." She glanced at the dressing-table again, picked up a bottle. "What are these, Eva? For your head?"

"Only sleeping tablets."

"Oh!" Linda's pursed-up suspicion could be seen in the mirror. "Don't take too many." For her, such palliatives brought up newspaper inquests on cut-adrift women found in lonely beds.

"Chap I know in the laboratory swallows sleeping tablets ever since he got married," Philip averred. "Only way to get sleep, he says."

Linda stepped out of the room with an ignoring gait, avoiding her husband but markedly leaving him there; she even drew the door to somewhat and could be heard plodding to their room down the passage. Philip became gruesomely concerned, breathing out brotherly anxiety: Eva, unmarried and possibly let down in a dastardly way by some ruffian, needed a hale knight. "You're not worried, Eva? Anything I can do? Tell Phil! There, don't cry!"

"I'm not crying," she said, blowing smoke out.

"God, you're a looker!" snorted Philip, backing

a step to the door. "I don't mind telling you, I——"

"Run off now, you idiot," she laughed.

He stood slowly nodding his head, in his shiny face the fearless look, forthright and impervious to the authority of neat domestic order, which she knew so well in others of his age and kind. At breakfast tomorrow he would be pompously silent, or censorious, complaining of the toast. Rising from the chair, she dismissed him with a sudden formidable gesture, closing herself like the slam of a door.

"Good-night." He achieved in his growl the suggestion of, if not a challenge, a mischief only adjourned.

After a long hesitation she swallowed two of the granules. Pulling back the curtains, opening the window a few inches, she stood looking out into the spring night. Wallflower scent came up thick from the garden. The smudged hills lay back lightless, and from all the town below rose the silence of workers neatly ensconced in the welfare of sleep justly earned. But for Mr. Dai she might well be one of the inhabitants down there, sleeping in a slice of one of the black angular terraces, a man of solidity by her side, grown-up children at hand. . . . Impossible! Even without Mr. Dai it could never have happened. She wasn't cut out for it.

When she crossed to the bed her face was contracted. After looking at her watch—it was half-past twelve—and switching out the bedside lamp she stretched out with the sigh that had become habitual. Afterwards, she couldn't remember going off to sleep. But she recalled the time. The calamity occurred less than an hour later.

She woke slowly, musing detachedly over the strange sensation of a hand stroking her face. A ghost touched her. The name Elwyn drifted in her mind. There was a dream-like memory of a walk in a cemetery, and a far-off sense of someone singing an operatic aria. . . . The sensation hardened into something more concrete. The hand passing across her face was not a ghost's!

She lay still, collecting her faculties. *Philip!*

She groaned inside herself, knowing that the grotesque and the impossible could happen—impossible yet factual as a great evil, such as murder, can invade one's life. Now for the explosion in this house! Yet need it be? She lay calculating. Again the hand stroked her face. Across the eyes, down the cheek. Was she fully awake yet?

"Philip," she whispered, "don't be silly. Go away at once." The hand withdrew. She half opened her eyes. Darkness! But the sense of a presence kneeling beside the bed had an inescapable force. "Philip, go away," she said. The low-pitched conversational tone struck her own ears oddly. Rousing herself, she said more forcefully: "Do you want me to scream? You realise what will happen?"

"Who is Philip?"

The undercurrent of laughter in the whisper lasted long in her ears. For a moment or two total weakness inhibited all her body. Then she eased herself up on the pillow, demanding: "Put on the light!" He could see in the darkness like a cat. A cat, a member of the great cat family. Her visual impression of him clarified in that moment. Secret,

self-absorbed, pouncing as a cat! And able to leap through a window?

The bedside lamp struck out its glow. "Have you taken leave of your senses?" she whispered. But the trite enquiry somehow reassured her. More alertly, entire consciousness beating up, she demanded: "What are you doing? Stop it!"

He was undressing, and paid no attention to her protest. A greenish leather jacket was flung on the floor, a bold-checked shirt followed, battered sandals, tight, once-blue cotton trousers peeled off—absorbed, he was one who would undress with the same air of assurance in castle or cottage, doss-house or Ritz. "I found some bread and cheese in the kitchen," he said, occupied. That he kept his voice low was at least a recognition of the audacious intrusion. And in some strange way his undressing actions eased the shock, even made the invasion seem more ordinary. At the same time, warily eyeing him, she remembered the granules she had taken. Were her faculties weakened? Why did she remain in bed? Half her attention went beyond the door and down the passage.

"Did you arrive with the quarter to ten train?" she mumbled.

"No. I've been in the town several hours. Caught the same train that you took yesterday, you dirty trickster. Always had this address." He threw a cerise sock, which had a big hole in the toe-part, across the room. "Not a bad place, this Bylau. Went in a pub outside the station when I arrived and played skittles with some chaps—miners, I think. Didn't know they had skittle alleys in pubs. 'Working at the fairs, are you?' a chap asked me; I said

I was driving a lorry, and he asked if I wanted a bed for the night. 'Got one,' I told him."

He sprang on to the bed. She had drawn the covers up tight round her throat in clenched hands. "Eric ought to see you! What a subject for him! *Virgin Surprised in Starched Sheets in Bylau.* Your face, dear!" he remarked, earnest, crouched on the bed.

"Go away," she whispered. To gain more time, she asked: "How did you get in?"

"The kitchen window. I've been hiding behind a bush in the front garden for a long time. Saw a man drive up, put the car away, and water the flowers in the border before going in—your brother-in-law, I suppose? You know how I can wait. I saw you standing at the window, so knew your room." And he admonished: "This is what you deserve, isn't it? Dirty trickster! Worse, a coward. I had to borrow two quid from Eric for the single fare here. . . . Nice thing if you or your sister refused me entrance at the front door—what would I have done? Hitch-hiked back, I suppose? Or gone to work down those bloody mines you've talked about?"

"Go away. Go back." Her wits seemed to be wandering. She went on: "My bag is in the dressing-table drawer . . . several pounds . . . take it all and go. There's an early train——"

He stretched a hand to the covers bunched about her throat and playfully tugged. The lamplight made the tanned flesh of his arm gleam like satin. He smiled. All about him was that flavour of assured destructiveness which, with a quality of intelligence and proudly isolated chastity, she had

come to dread. She drew the sheets tighter and whispered in panic: "My sister might come in."

He landed soundlessly on the carpet, went to the door and turned the key. Back at the bed, he snatched at the covers tucked into the end and burrowed in there, at her crossed feet. A sound like a sob or grunt came from her. All the covers tumbled to the floor. The lamp remained alight. The shock, compounded of astonishment, verified fear, and dread of rousing the house, sank obliterated. The clear-cut fact of his presence, outlawed from all extraneous circumstances, took victorious possession.

Her palms pressed over his ears, she drew up his head, and gazed for long moments at the uncapturable features: a foible familiar to him and endured as a wild creature most alive in the night endures, blinking, the scrutiny of the sun. Then she said: "And now you must go."

"Without any breakfast?" Rolling to her side, leaning on an elbow, he fondled her breasts. Absorbed, smiling, intent, his face finally plunged there, these antics at least allowed her time for thought.

She suddenly cried, curbing her loud tone at once: "You must go back! Why do you think I came here?"

"Old-fashioned nerves." He was smiling. "The panic of an interior revolution." His lips passed along the softly yielding flesh of her arm. "You want a holiday. I *did* suggest Paris, remember? Instead, it's Bylau! . . . Perhaps a village by the sea is best for your state. I can borrow a caravan in Cornwall from Kit Dixon. Fresh mackerel and

cream." He enjoyed food avariciously. She had even gone to the length of studying cookery books.

"You've got to take that first train! The connection for the early London train leaves Bylau at half-past six." Stretching across him, she looked at her watch. He still smiled and, lying on his side, began to curl up for sleep. "Did you hear? The first train!"

"Why do you worry?" he murmured, as she got out to pick up the covers. "Come back . . ." he said drowsily, eyes closed. "*I* have come back . . ." He lay silent.

She threw on the covers, got in, and settled for the three hours before it would be necessary to begin the task of getting him out. The bedside lamp remained lit. She set her mind against sleep. Surely the effect of those tablets would be gone by now? . . . Philip got up at half-past seven and made tea, taking a cup to Linda, who got up at eight o'clock and at nine would bring tea to her sister. . . . All that was needed in this crisis was unbreakable resolution. Crisis after crisis. . . . Her drooping lids shot up.

He was fast asleep. The faint smile parted those lips from which could come such damaging language. Looking at his face she experienced, yet again, despair, horror and self-ridicule. What would Linda say if she walked into the room now? The social aspect, especially here, was too unpleasant to contemplate: his presence in this house was outrageous. . . . That face! As always in bed, fallen asleep, he looked about eighteen, though often in talk, especially in dispute, he seemed double that age—older than Philip, for instance. In calendar

years he was twenty-four. What *was* his age? Particularly in the middle of the night like this! Age was a matter of conduct, of circumstances, was of variable significance. But it held the final word?

She wanted to weep: but she worked herself into indignation. Hunted! Trapped! Hadn't she packed up, fled—yes, fled, fled—at great inconvenience (and to boredom here at Bylau), hadn't she already shown resolution and courage—bitter courage? He was a crook in the making. Breaking into a house! Risking a scandal in her home town, ruthlessly disregarding respectably-married Linda and Philip with his executive job at the laboratories. . . .

He muttered some incoherent words, turned towards her, blindly seeking. An undemanding arm gently embraced her—but as though she were a great necessity. He sighed deeply. A necessity—it was all as simple as that? She lay back. She begged for laughter, as so often she had laughed at, and with, him. Surely all this was very funny? A peculiar sound came, and she stroked her throat.

He must go . . . he must go. She fought the seductive threat of sleep. But she slept. And woke promptly at six o'clock. He lay in exactly the same position, head against her left shoulder, arm across her. It was some moments before she lifted her fist and lightly struck his shoulder. He gave a jump.

"The train!" she hissed.

Bewilderment lasted three seconds. With agility, and elegantly, he slapped her face, turned his back on her, and snuggled down to oblivion like a married man on Sunday morning. For a while she remained stolidly sitting up, looking at nothing, a

woman shut into her first cell with the words of her sentence still solemn in her ears. She was at his mercy in this house! In his present mood he would face a hundred outraged householders and only become meek if an enquiring policeman, accustomed to drunks, loomed up.

She got out of bed and, with a fowl-like movement, shook herself. Wandering round the room, attempting to think constructively, a treacherous physical weakness hampered her. Already he was fast asleep again. She could hear the ticking of her watch. If she drove that brooch-pin into his leg he would yell. She walked from the grey window, sat down, got up, powdered her face, reddened her lips, and knelt by the bed.

"Val," she called softly, stroking his hair, "Val, my darling, Val . . . Val."

He opened his eyes. And, studying her face, he smiled—lingeringly, but with impervious victory. Time was of no more account than futile social usages. "Silly!" he murmured. "I never thought you would really run away." Stretching, relaxing, he lay indolent. "What are you trying to escape? After all my work on you! Why are you so frightened?"

She pleaded: "At the moment it's only a question of your being in this house, Val. It's a house reserved for something else. My sister doesn't know of your existence. And I want quiet for a while—a little while, Val! Will you go with that train?"

"*No.* At least, not without you."

She sighed. "Well, will you leave the house before they get up? I'll meet you in the town at eleven o'clock. By then I'll have had time to think

about it all. I might decide to come back with you."

"All right. I'm sure you want to go to the bathroom; you sound in agony." He leapt out of bed. "Don't be long there."

Momentarily she had thought to let everything crash . . . allow him his destructive strut as he pleased. Linda?—did she really care what Linda, or Philip, would think? Was it really guilt, or shame, that distressed her? Wasn't it that he defeated her? . . . Returned on tiptoe from the bathroom, feeling more mundane from the ablutions, she rested in the thought that the intrusion of last night was not, after all, so outrageous, considering all that she had allowed him formerly. And she had half expected some such pursuit. Even wanted it?

"Be quiet going to the bathroom, and lock the door." He was already dressed, the leather lumber jacket of peeling old green buttoned up. "Take your sandals off; they flap. And don't use my brother-in-law's shaving things; you can get a shave in the town. I'm not making breakfast. There's a café you can go to later."

"See what your imbecility has brought on you!" he observed, but obediently pulled off the slouching sandals. "You'll be paying for it with grey hairs."

He tiptoed down the passage, while she watched at the door. Fortunately the bathroom was at the back of the house. A clean morning light, ordinary and assuring, seeped in. Already the bustle of a freight train came from across the river. Housewives soon would be stirring, and working husbands

setting off dutifully: the whole orderly town, cleansed of its old moral ricketiness, would be adjusting hands and minds to securely everyday tasks in its new glory of factory estates and nationalised coal-mines. Oh, she had no place in Bylau now, she ought to leave with Val at once, return to her logical setting: both she and Val were bizarre here.

Mechanically she opened a drawer and took out her handbag. He came in, without noise, locking the door again, angelically submissive. "A nice prim house!" he whispered. "All Home Sweet Home and Old Sleeping Furies. Reminds me of my father's house."

"Here's five pounds. You can't run about this town without money. Anyone can see you're a stranger."

He looked like a rather grubby art student crossed with a strain of the intelligent ruffian, the delicacy of his face in marked contrast to the exuding animality of his springing body. But it was the anti-social dilapidation of his clothes, worn with an æsthetic jauntiness, that arrested first glances. In Paris, even in London, she had seen dozens of him; in Bylau the policeman in the Square would pause to note him. He tucked the five pounds in the pocket of his tight jeans; it might have been an order for the grocer.

"You won't double-cross me? I suspect you're still up to some game or other."

"You've got the upper hand just now, haven't you? I'll be in the Square, where the buses stop, at eleven. Perhaps with my suitcase."

Their whispers brought back the old confederacy.

Smiling, he stroked her cheek, as he had stroked her awake last night. "Silly girl. So worked-up! Running away at your age! Surely I'm the one who ought to run away?"

"I wish to God you would." She drew the dressing wrap tight as though cold.

"Run away from my most valuable possession? Besides——" He murmured in her ear.

"Better go through the back garden." After listening in the passage she beckoned and, with pounding chest, prowled before him to the stairs: he carried his sandals but walked nonchalantly. Philip's hangover snores could be heard coming from the corner front room. In the kitchen Val put on his sandals, snatched two stale scones from a plate on the dresser, and pushed them in his pocket. She had to make an effort to speak. "You'll see a fence at the end; skirt round the garage." She opened the door. "I hope there's no policeman on a bike doing this district." The morning blew in crisp. Hands on hips, he looked into the grey elemental day like a diver.

"A policeman? I'll say I'm only a poor Romeo thrown out breakfastless for obeying his true instincts." He kissed her cheek. She watched him tread lightly the path between two rows of privets which led to Linda's neat patches of lettuces and parsley. Beyond, he turned, gave a gesture of triumph, pulled up a sprig or two of parsley and, chewing, disappeared into the silent grey air. He had gone.

Her own sight seemed to have vanished with him. For a while she stood at the open door in a sort of catalepsy. In that morning stillness the episode

acquired a dream-like quality. Sleep was still about her. She turned, mechanically shut the door, even remembered to lock it again; even saw that the lower sash of the window was open, and closed it. She stood contemplative over the plate from which he had snatched the scones and reminded herself that if there was an enquiry from hawk-eyed Linda she must say that she came downstairs hungry in the night.

The return to her room was achieved without mishap. She remembered to examine the bathroom. Cowering down exhausted in the bed, sleep came almost at once. What did anything matter? She was at the end of her courage. But there was awareness that collapse, except when the Great Scavenger approaches to collect the debris, is never final. She slept like a child.

And woke aggressive. Linda, a lilt in her voice, bent over her with a cup of tea. "Half-past nine! . . . I came in at nine but you looked so peaceful I didn't disturb you. I suppose you took those tablets." Poor Eva, it had become plain, needed the cheerful attentions of a nurse.

"I wanted to get up early." She threw the covers back and jumped out.

"Good heavens, you're energetic this morning! A good sign, dear. Drink your tea. I slept well myself, as a matter of fact."

Waiting for Linda to go, she drank. But Linda, glancing round the room, began: "I'm packing the parcel for Llewellyn; it must go with the midday post. Where's that black sweater you said he could have?"

Eva laid down the cup: it wobbled in the saucer.

Had she seen the sweater on Val, under the lumber jacket, when she returned so preoccupied from the bathroom? The sweater belonged to him; he had left it in her London flat. "Isn't it here?" she mumbled.

"It was in the room last night. I remember looking at it. Where is it?"

"Look in the drawers and wardrobe."

Unrewarded elsewhere, Linda even peered under the bed. "Well! It couldn't have walked away. Did you take it to the bathroom?"

"Perhaps I did."

Linda, morning briskness in her already predatory gait, darted out. When she returned her soft but plucky nose was positively quivering in the hunt. Eva, looking attentively at her watch, said: "I had a visitor last night. He must have taken the sweater."

Linda's immediate reaction astonished even her sister. "What, stolen it, you mean?"

"Don't be silly, Linda."

Linda sat down bleak-faced on the edge of a chair. "What are you saying?" she wailed. Her sister, hopelessly, knew her thought was on Philip. But this suspicion dismissed at once, poor Linda waited; even her netted hair seemed to have become tighter in caution.

"A friend from London has been here. He came in through the kitchen window—Philip must have left it unfastened. He left about six o'clock,"

"Was it light?" Linda breathed, paler.

"There are no neighbours," Eva pointed out, in the same over-concise way.

"One or two people go past on their bikes early,

from the Bwlch. . . . Through the kitchen window! Climbing in like a burglar——"

Eva, steadying herself, looked again at her watch. There was enough time. "I should like to bring him to lunch." A note of supremacy toughened her voice now, although she spoke at random. "Or perhaps supper tonight; I'll see; I'm meeting him at eleven. What have you got? He eats a lot. Perhaps he'll return to London today."

The title deeds of the house belonged to Eva. Linda sat winded between the division in her mind. She had never met any of Eva's London gentlemen in the flesh. On the other hand, Eva's London activities were probably best left obscure there and ought never to cross a front doorstep cleaned daily these many years by her sister's married hands. Linda stared into space.

"Is this why you've been so jumpy since you arrived?" she hedged.

"Yes. I didn't want him to come here. Hasn't it been plain?"

"It's plain you're in a bad way. If you want to get rid of him, why ask him to a meal?"

"There are various ways of getting rid of people." Irritably she prepared to dress. "I can't stop to talk now. What have you got for lunch if we come back?"

"Eggs . . . an omelette. I was going to make a plum tart in any case." Linda rose, now deeply preoccupied herself. "I must go and pack Llewellyn's parcel of washing."

Eva hastened to the door and called: "If we come to lunch I'll bring some steak from Oliver's. An omelette won't be enough."

"Edwards's has better steak than Oliver's," Linda shouted from the stairs. "Will you take Llewellyn's parcel to the post? Under the circumstances," the shout proceeded, "I don't want to go out."

She banged with dustpan and broom elsewhere while Eva rapidly took toast and coffee in the kitchen; she was upstairs when Eva walked through the hall, calling: "I'm going now. If were not back by one-thirty we're not coming."

"Have you got the parcel?" Linda shrieked.

It was a relief to be out in the clear morning, with a warbling milk-boy coming down the lane and greeting the stranger, a relief to see a steam-roller on the common with two reliable-looking men cleaning the brass breastplate, the town's chimneys mildly smoking, and an old woman, a straw plate of crushed flowers on her head, taking a thoroughly subdued dog for a walk. She found herself in possession of courage, decision and authority. The problem of Val and herself, by its very outlandishness and element of the excessive (its scandalous element did not really offend her even here in Bylau—no, no, how could it?) could be resolved by hard common sense and firmness (together with cash). A projection of herself trotted across the common with the celerity of an efficient secretary on an important errand.

Why had she arranged to meet him in the busy Square? What a state she must have been in! Across the space, between the traffic and townsfolk out on proper pursuits, she saw the slight raffish figure in the faded blue cotton trousers and decrepit leather jacket waiting in inquisitive awareness of this provincial centre: he was studying the

statue of Vavasour Beddoes, discoverer of the Bylau coal deposits. The renovated shops, garish of façade and passed out of the intimate private ownership of her Bylau days, made her feel old. She paused in sudden pounding tumult (walking too fast again?). He had not yet seen her, attentive to the bustling contents of the Square, never bored anywhere, liable to pick up anyone. Her heart steadied. When she approached he looked at the brown-paper parcel and asked: "Is that all your luggage?"

"I'm not catching a train." He was wearing the sweater under the leather jacket, but she decided to say nothing.

"Where are we going, then?"

There was nowhere suitably quiet near-by. She could only think, already harassed, of the cemetery. Did anyone of the old days recognise her? She kept her gaze averted. Passers-by glanced at them curiously. The young man stood close, eyes fixed on his companion, oblivious and exhibitionary, like one with sole right to the charms, still wonderfully extant, of this mature woman. She thought they must seem arrestingly contrasted. A bus drew up. She got on it, clumsily dropping the parcel, and Val leapt after her. "Some sandwiches?" he asked, picking up the parcel. "A picnic somewhere?"

She fumbled in her bag like a woman needing glasses. "Two to Bryn Hyfryd." It was the same interested conductor who had paid operatic serenade to the world yesterday. Today he did not sing.

"Thank you, madame. Weather keeps fine for Bryn Hyfryd." The conductor gave a glance at Val. Perhaps the lady's son?

"Smoking is allowed inside the buses here," Val approved, nicotined-stained fingers lighting a cigarette. "I like this Bylau. Much more civilised than London; fewer nanny-men in power here, I imagine . . . I saw a girl buying chops in a butcher's while I was waiting and I thought Eric ought to paint her. He'd go mad at sight of her. She had everything a painter wants."

Eva sat looking out at the prim little front gardens and coupled Edwardian houses of Cynon Street. Mr. Dai had owned four of these houses, and rented one to the bard Luther Parry, who vanished one night with his wife and chattels: nothing was found in the house except a pile of bills, empty beer bottles, and two volumes of a popular encyclopædia. "What do you mean by everything?" she auntishly asked, becoming aware of what Val had said about a girl buying chops.

"Raw beauty," he teased, "unadorned and to be adorned by the painter; myth-making face; body excavated from mythology too. I watched her buying chops with my nose pressed to the window."

"What kind of chops?" she asked suspiciously.

"Pork, I believe."

"Did you accost her when she left?"

"She stared at me—puzzled and frightened, I think. Not more than twenty-three. But her hair was that Rossetti red——" He shook his head. "Too bushy and violent."

"You followed her?"

"No."

The bus stopped; they alighted. "Where are you taking me?" he bleated at the cemetery gates.

"I wish to God you were going in horizontally.

. . . That parcel," she fretted, "ought to go with the midday post." They went up the steep deserted main avenue. "This is the only place we can sit and talk without being seen."

"You've chosen it deliberately?" He pinched her arm. "There's not going to be any last rites, see!"

"We'll sit here." She stopped, with a little pant, at one of the four benches in the circular halt where Mr. Dai's column stood black as an unwashed miner on its costly plinth. "Look, Val darling," she opened at once, "I want to simplify things. We've got to finish. We can't go on like this. I'm beginning to feel so . . . well, *undignified.*"

His shout of laughter, doubly unseemly in that place, daunted her. "But you've got all the dignity in the world, Eva. For instance, no one could use the word 'tart' about you, except in affection. Undignified, my fanny. I've told you before that one of your best attractions is your . . . *restfulness.* You belong to better days!" Having given vent to this with teasing derision, he added: "Why do you think I enjoy sleeping with you so much?"

She did not look at him. The sting coming from the presence beside her was enough. Her eyes on the black column, praying for strength, she said: "Do you know my real age?"

He laughed again, kicking off a sandal to extract a piece of gravel. "At night we're equal. In the daytime you look forty—knowing me has knocked five years off you, I expect."

She looked at the supple, firm-rooted nomad's neck as he leaned down. She was about to tell him her exact age but said: "Go and look at the dates at the base of that column."

He crossed to the plinth and read the inscription. "What about it?" he called. "A tombstone to David Pryce, the Father of Bylau . . . 'Mr. Dai' in brackets." He returned grinning. "You were one of his daughters? You're not a love-child, Eva?"

"I was Mr. Dai's mistress until he died."

He was not to be misled. "One of those nasty old men? I can see him pawing simple little Eva in her gym-dress and pigtails. Did he send you off to a finishing school?"

She indicated the scored acres to the left of the avenue. "Over there is the grave of the young man I rejected in favour of Mr. Dai, although I was in love with him."

"Eva, what on earth are we doing here? I want a drink."

She sat resolute. "I ask you to leave Bylau this afternoon. But I want to help you. It's time you settled down. Your trouble is that you've had no sense of ownership of anything . . . no security," she went on, aware of the futility of such deductions nonetheless; "no parents except that father you refuse to see. I want to spend a sum of money for you on buying that house of Jackie's off the Fulham Road. The rents of the two studios in it ought at least to keep a solid roof over your head."

The concrete offer had arrested him; his feet ceased to squirm. "You want to make a man of me? At the price of being cut off from you?"

"I'm going to settle in Bylau," she said quickly, surprising herself. "The house you broke into last night is mine. . . . Surely," she resumed hopefully, "you could work at Harl's more regularly once you've tasted a sense of security? Harl was at

Queenie's when I telephoned her one evening and I spoke to him. He praised your intelligence. . . . 'A pity about that boy,' he said. 'He's got taste and up-to-date ideas; I could use him on the lay-outs, but it's bad for studio morale when he turns up at noon unwashed and marmalade on his snout; my girls start giggling soon as he arrives.' "

"Harl," observed Val, "has the reputation of being the only man in London who has succeeded in getting a working mannequin in the family way."

"Are you going to accept my offer?" she demanded impatiently.

He shook his head. "It's not good enough, Eva. I don't like the thought of not seeing you. You give me so much comfort."

She flung out her hands: still she avoided looking at him. "What *do* you want?"

"If only you were fifteen . . . ten . . . years younger I would suggest we got married. But even I can see it would be too absurd, much as I believe that everything in the world is absurd, in the sense that everything is insecure and askew and irrational. It would be more absurd for you than for me. You couldn't take it, could you?"

"What, marriage to you?" she mumbled, recalled from the distracted anguish in which she had only half listened. "But I want to get rid of you! You're too much for me. I'm too old. . . Old, old, old!" she raised her voice.

"Not last night, you weren't. I knew last night you could cope with me all right."

"That," she said, hard, "was the weight of professional experience."

"You are my home," he said solemnly. "The only roof I've got."

"The little waif!" she jeered, and exploded: "You give me nothing but misery." That's not true, she thought, in deeper misery, and curbed herself somewhat: "Why the devil don't you marry Oriana or one of those Eric girls? They talk your language, you're growing up together, forming all the proper memories."

"I've told you before—I prefer my period-piece." He flicked a finger towards Mr. Dai's tomb. "As, apparently, you preferred a period-piece in your day."

"The circumstances were quite different." Already a weariness was weakening the resolution.

He shrugged. "If I hadn't met you I might have married Oriana. Under that underbaked crust of hers she's got stamina."

"You're not logical in your opinion of the absurd and the world askew. I stand for security and you hanker for me . . . I might be dead in ten years," she added. Her voice seemed to be wandering directionless.

"Would you be buried under that phallus of Mr. What's-his-name?"

"That will do, Val. I won't have fun made of Mr. Dai."

"Presumably you'd leave me all your money?" He laughed, bright and springing.

"I've already made my will. My sister gets everything, in trust for her son."

"Your sister doesn't mind the source of your money?"

"What, stocks and shares?" she said, exhausted.

"The Stock Exchange . . ." he ruminated; "like the sea it turns flesh into something rich and strange."

A plump girl of ten or twelve came trotting up the avenue, a bunch of flowers in her hand, her pink face smiling. Stopping before the couple on the bench, she drew breath and said like a woman of thirty: "Nice morning! Have you got the right time?" Told it, she informed them: "It's my dinner hour from school and my mother sent me up with these for Aunt Beth's grave because it's her birthday. Only married a twelvemonth before she died, poor thing—Mrs. Bowen of the Bwlch; did you know her?" She addressed Eva, but peeped at Val from behind thick glasses, rattling on in the local manner: "Her husband's got courting already with Marged Roberts in the hairdresser's opposite the Institute—isn't he quick!"

Val spoke to her as to a contemporary. "Have you had your dinner?" She hadn't; he went on: "Neither have we. Where's the best place to eat here?"

"They say the Coity Inn. It's where they hold receptions." She responded to him approvingly, prepared to gossip, and he smiled at her with a correct return of affability, putting her at her ease. Eva watched, absorbed. "Would you like one or two of these geraniums?" the child asked them, smiling at the large bunch of flowers in her hand.

"They're for your Auntie Beth," Val reminded her, and, confidentially: "They're wallflowers, not geraniums."

She squealed in delighted disgrace. "Oh, are they? Well, Auntie Beth won't know, will she?"

Recalled to her task she suddenly trotted off, calling: "Good afternoon, now." Val got up decisively from the bench.

"You like children," Eva remarked, waking.

"I'm starving. Are you coming?" He took up the parcel of Llewellyn's washing.

"You have plenty of time to catch that three o'clock train," she said obsessively, getting up.

"I'm staying, Eva. I'll go to that pub and find the man who offered me a bed in his house. Or this Coity Inn. I like it here. We'll go to the pictures tonight. Can I call for you?"

They walked down the avenue: she had flung a last look at Mr. Dai's solid column. "What is the point of your staying if I refuse to see you?"

"You've got yourself into a ridiculous state, Eva."

She gave a start. "The whole situation is ridiculous," she said, her voice reduced.

"Yes, quite absurd," he grinned. "But never question the validity of any human relationship."

"Take that three o'clock train," she entreated. "I don't want to see you. I'll buy you that house *and* furniture to go in it."

"I want *all* your money, darling. I know when I'm on a good thing. You've got the whole works except virginity and youth." As they left the cemetery, he added: "Why don't you have the strength to be weak? Take what's going and enjoy it while it lasts. You shouldn't have come to this town. It's dead for you, death, it's a finish. Look, take me somewhere for a year—perhaps we can stretch bliss to two years? You know I've got an itch to travel, and you can afford it. It will make a man of me. We can go to a Greek island or inside Morocco. If

you're tired of me after that, I'll clear out. But I want you to be dependent on me. You know how good and nice I can be . . . And I'm beautiful," he hooted. "Oriana said so."

"Val, I shiver when you talk like that. Are you content to be a parasite always?"

"A sponge has its uses," he said, but sounded dubious of the observation. "You mean work? I'll always find something. You know I've got good connections in the dives. Only the other day Harris of the Nightshade offered me a job, clerical in the afternoon, in the bar at nights. He said they like a wholesome-looking chap at the drinks. We're not walking to the town, are we?"

"But your middle age . . . your old age!" she cried, trudging on, even hurrying her steps.

"It's exasperating how you try to graft a character on to someone it doesn't fit. Will you take me on that trip? I'll paint. Terrible pictures sell best if cheaply. Native market places and Mediterranean sunsets, all beautifully done in salmon's blood, ape's bottom purple, and bile green. What a time we'll have! We'll discuss it at lunch."

"No." She looked round distraught for a bus.

By the time they reached the town's centre she was indifferent to what happened. She thought in relief of the house beyond the Common and Linda taking down the omelette pan. Halting in the Square, she said: "I cannot force you on the train. All I can do is to let you get bored in this town. I'm going home now. Will you post the parcel for me?" She also heard herself say: "Book a room in the Coity Inn if you're staying; it's the only residential hotel. You can come to the house tonight if you

like, and meet my sister and her husband . . . seven-thirty."

He looked into her eyes and saw the hard resolution of a woman aloof in a not-seeing impassivity. She left him abruptly; a car hooted indignantly as she crossed the cobbles. Her knees were weak. The glossy façades of furniture and food shops, the rocking buses, the faceless people, had vanished. She was isolated with him on an antique island drowsy with sun and silence, and the fugitive vision of this, unreal and treacherous, held her in a cloudy nausea.

CHAPTER SIX

SHE HAD MET VAL in The Goat in Boots one damp spring night. Now and again, perhaps twice a month, she refreshed and educated herself by visiting this pub to listen to the young wild ones there. It was within easy walking distance of her flat near the British Museum. No one quite knew why its particular clientele had chosen The Goat in Boots, dingy and in an out-of-the-way street, as a meeting place; some said it was because of its name.

She had known Iolo Hancock, one of The Goat's more celebrated habitues, for a few years. Iolo seemed ever looking for a stray bed when she first knew him, until he found a room of his own in Covent Garden. He was a compatriot, good poet and ornamental talker. Once she had acccommodated him for the night, but he was too drunk to be anything but a childish nuisance.

"At first," he had declared in the morning, as they lolled over a pot of tea, "I thought you were a Bloomsbury bluestocking—you know how some of them make themselves up to look like tarts, especially the novelists. You're the first Welsh whore I've met. I didn't know there was such a person. You don't mind me calling you a whore?"

"No; not you. Besides, it isn't quite true."

"What made you go this way?" At that time he was in the middle twenties, reasonably fresh of face,

his feet loitering uncertainly near the primrose path.

"A liking for men."

"Your aspect of them can be good. It's one of their few attributes that keep them from being a total disgrace to concepts of civilisation and religion. . . . But don't they ever let you down?" he asked, ungallant after this sober morning sententiousness.

"It's as well to be let down sometimes. A short cut to avoid boredom that always arrives in the end." She leaned back against the painted panel of nymphs and shepherds inset in the baroque bedstead of gold wood.

Iolo stroked her cheek—as invariably they stroked her cheeks—and recompensed: "The beautifullest skin I've ever seen! Odd how you suggest eatably beautiful deep flesh without being plump or lazy or lollipop. . . . Women like you are a good thing," he had got going. "You make our men halt for a while in the placidity of the East. You're more odalisque than sooty London whore."

"I'm far from being placid," she laughed, always liking Iolo. "I've begun to worry. I think a lot about the past now—is it a bad sign? But I try to keep my broodings to myself and do my duty to all."

"You come of an old and well-bred race. But you've lowered its prestige. I don't suppose you ever go back to your home town?"

"Oh, yes." She looked at her watch. "You'd better leave soon, Iolo. Mrs. Gosbee, my cleaner, will be here."

Dressing, he asked her: "Can you lend me a quid

until the end of the week? I ought to get paid for a poem in *The Listener* by then. I'll see you in The Goat."

Always, in the crowded pub, he would attempt to bring her into the retinue of young or ever-youngish men and studio-type girls constantly surrounding him, though she preferred to sit apart, either on the wall benches or a stool at the bar, listening. Iolo borrowed money under everybody's nose and often returned it, not under everybody's nose. She began to be fond of him in a respectful way. In him fame and public exhibitionism were for once in congress with sterling talent. To hear him read his poems on the wireless, or at parties—she was dragged to one or two by Iolo—arrested everybody. He was both the traditional bard renewed and a benevolent old witch. God was deposited in his sorely-tried bladder and cirrhotic liver. When at last he rented a Covent Garden attic room she sometimes climbed up to it with a pound of sausages, spray of bananas or jar of ox-tongue. She remembered how Mr. Dai had been a patron of art to Luther Parry.

On the spring night when Val appeared in the retinue Iolo was very drunk. Val, much less drunk than Iolo, but with a fixed gleam in his darkly yellowish eye, had accosted her at the packed bar counter. She had already noted him and, turning her back, laid down her glass on the counter with a reproof of herself. Had Iolo said something about her to this rudely staring young man? Or one of the others in the drunken group? Months ago she had consented to sit for one of them. The picture was hung in a gallery—looking, she thought, coarse and fleshy despite the gush of colours, like a street

barrow of flowers and fruit, given to the composition.

"Now, Mr. Hancock." Maud, the barmaid, was banging the counter with a tankard. "If you're going to be sick, out you go." At the same time Val asked: "Can I come home with you?"

A negro honked protectingly over the request, a naval rating gesticulated to a wax Woolworth girl whose flaxen guardsman companion, his honest face unchanged from the fifteenth century, yielded the rating this girl. The Goat was a pub where the arts mixed with the people to mutual advantage. Val was pushed aside by a drunk demanding service of harassed Maud. The near-by Iolo Hancock group loudly argued. Iolo, arrived at the hallucinatory stage, lurched to Eva and laid his head on her bosom.

"All the perfumes of Araby!" he heaved. "Eau de Cologne!" he sniffed.

"Now, Mr. Hancock——" Maud banged.

Val pushed in again and plucked at Iolo's sleeve. "Come outside, Iolo," he said, hoarsely. Iolo plunged deeper into the bosom. "A gold mine!" he muttered. No one took any notice. The group argued. The sketchy charcoal old lady on the end bar-stool dedicated to her went on imperturbably reading *The Times* through a magnifying glass.

Eva was afraid for her dress. "Let's get him outside," Val urged her. "You know where he lives?"

She took one arm, Val the other, and they bore the flaccid body of the poet through the disregarding crowd towards a side door. "The nanny-men of England are on the prowl!" a swarthily bearded

young man in the group loudly declaimed. "A few spivs, crooks and prostitutes are still left, the only free people. . . . Down with pleasure! Only another war will make us free again. Get yourself a television set and stay cowering at home . . ."

"Hark at that sober bastard!" Iolo growled, lifting his lolling head for a moment at the door.

Once in the air he gained a little ballast and shook his bearers off. They had come out into a gaslit Victorian cobbled yard strewn with rubbish bins, hand-barrows, an enamelled bath and other throw-outs. Against a wall leaned an unclothed tailor's dummy complete with head: an overflow pipe spouted water beside it. Iolo's globular eyes stared towards this apparition as though an assassin lurked in the yard's murky depths. "Where's your trousers?" he demanded in his hoarse, full-booming voice.

"We'll get a cab," Eva said. "Let him be sick first."

"Hermes," boomed Iolo, pointing to the apparition and rising to the *hwyl* of his native land, "Hermes of the wind-swept orchard, by the fountain where the cold pure water gushes out . . ." He staggered against the wall near the water-sprinkled dummy.

"Put your finger down your throat," Val advised. The dirty gaslight made the backyard alley a phantasmagoric setting for a cinema murder of early date.

Iolo began to vomit. First came gurglings-out of easy liquid, followed by more concentrated deposits. He put up his left hand to catch these last and the fingers of his right turned over the palmful of gleaming matter, scrabbling like a priest seeking in

the entrails of a sacrificed beast the forecast of momentous events. "Melted green of stars," he gurgled, "oils of silver, water blues . . . dissolved pearls . . . fluid eyes. A man bears within him the fabulous liquids of death. I'm going to die."

"You take the long view," Val said.

Iolo flung the handful to the cobbles. "Got a handkerchief?"

"Here's your cap." Val had it tucked in the belt of his jeans.

Iolo tucked the cap halo-like on his sturdy curls. The famous voice, often heard spouting masterpieces at a million hearths, was somewhat clearer now. "And her!" he pointed at the hovering Eva whilst he made water on the cobbles. "The best kip in London. Where's Ann?"

"She went off with Pierre. They spoke of going to the Nightshade for supper."

"He'll give her crabs. Sitting there combing her hair like a mermaid! Got a cigarette? I'm going home. Tell Ann I'm gone home."

"We're taking you home," Eva said, advancing.

"I bought a champion great eel today for supper with Ann. It's hanging round the neck of that statue Cedric asked me to keep for him. Sea serpent. Got me started on work. B.B.C. wants a long poem. Thirty quid. Better get back to it."

"With us," Eva said, and told Val: "Get a cab."

Iolo pointed. "Going to take him with me."

Eva coaxed. But Iolo put his arms round the tailor's dummy and, lurching, dragged it to the archway opening on to the street. Val peered up and down, but there were no helmets of law and order visible, and few passers-by. Two cab drivers

declined to take the awkward apparition which couldn't sit. Its discoloured papier maché face wore a film-star smile, and there was a gaping hole in the flank of the canvas-tight sexless body.

"What do you want it for?" Eva asked. Iolo pointed to the torn hole and said a bag of money could be kept in the hollow belly, safe from burglars and borrowers. A third driver, a young Jew, was accommodating. The dummy could just be got in, diagonally, across the three passengers, and there was only half a mile to go.

They drew up in a seventeenth-century street of gritty houses adjacent to the piazza in Covent Garden. It was a street bearing much of the greasy weight of the past. From one of its houses Otway, a favourite with Iolo, might have sent his tear-stained letter to the indifferent Mrs. Barry at near-by Drury Lane. A shawled woman with a jug came from the corner pub. The gum-chewing driver said: "Keeping him for Guy Fawkes night?"

"His name," Iolo boomed, arm round the stiff dummy while Eva paid the driver, "is Hermes. God of the ways and means. A birthday present for my girl, who has green hair and webbed feet and who howls like a fog-horn."

Eva laughed. "He's a ballet dancer whose legs have fallen on evil days."

"For the Lord's sake let's get in," Val squealed. "A bobby is in the distance."

This galvanised Iolo. Even more in drink than in sobriety he retained access to that child's kingdom of wonder where menace can stalk suddenly under the trees. He and Val bore Hermes up three flights of stairs, Eva behind them. A naked electric

bulb burned on a landing, illuminating an unframed painting of a monk praying inside a transparent refrigerator above which stared an apocalyptic eye with a butterfly in the pupil. A water-tap dripped. "I can smell goldfish," Iolo panted, not good of wind. "They smell of nasturtiums." Factually it was the bitter odour of the house.

Climbing those bare stairs Eva had an impulse to flee. "Now you're home, Iolo, I think I'll go——" she began. A dead body seemed to be borne above her.

"Don't go," Val entreated in a peculiar voice of anguish.

"Stay with me," Iolo wailed. *"They are there."*

The moment of choice. She recognised it. And found her legs mounting the stairs to the top landing while something else, her will or the old activity of guilt, descended them like a ghost. Iolo was kicking his foot noisily against his door, eyes listening in protuberant unison with ears. "They're grey," he shouted, "grey and hungry. Like the men in charge of the land! This is their hour!" he boomed, kicking again, waiting before opening the door. Hermes leaned against the banister with an athletically bemused smile, his wounded side gaping. "They come in from the ledge. Covent Garden rats, wily, sharp-snouted, with beetroot tails."

"Then why do you leave the windows open?" she asked, looking cautiously inside the open door, clutching her skirt.

"They're only D.T. rats," Val said, peering anxiously into the room.

Iolo, lurching again, picked up a letter pushed under the door and thrust it, unopened, inside Hermes's wound: it was marked *On His Majesty's Service*. He carried the god in and stood him against the mantelpiece.

"I'm going to send my Mrs. Gosbee round here one day," Eva said domestically.

"It's no worse than my room in Pimlico," Val said.

On a deal table, a kitchen chair beside it, many scattered and heavily corrected manuscript sheets bore witness to strict labour. Two disembowelled armchairs of horsehair, floor linoleum worn into holes, the two open windows bare of curtains or blinds, a mantelpiece piled with grit-blackened books, a rust-brown gas-fire and cooking-ring, an unpainted deal cupboard, a sort of horse-manger filled with used crockery and pans, a hollowed sort of divan or camp-bed with cushions, completed the home: Iolo was apt to say his mind was palatial. Suspended from the ceiling by an elaborate system of hooks, two pulleys and long ropes was a house-painter's cradle containing a mattress and blankets; it was where Iolo slept at nights, rocking pleasurably and safe from those rats.

Val stood admiring. "Ann was the model?"

On a pedestal in the middle of the room stood a carving in pale wood. Its triumphant ease and purity spread elegance all over the room. The subject, a nude girl, could even carry the eel slung round her neck: it gave her, together with the long history of pure civilisation in her vague smile, the aspect of a Minoan snake goddess.

"I'll work tomorrow," Iolo grumbled, shovelling

up the manuscript on the table. "Promised to read the poem in that sod's programme in May. Two months behind with it. Thirty quid."

"Read us a few lines," Eva coaxed. She always experienced a pleasing melancholy when Iolo's declaimings took her nostalgically to the land of her birth.

Iolo, never a shy violet about reading his work, roared out the opening stanzas, standing firm and plump for this. His voice, tumultuous, bardic, expert with tricks of *hwyl,* hauled up the words like a fisherman a net of opalescent herrings, hurling them out again in a shower of elemental wealth. The poem's subject was the sea. A saucer of unshelled cockles, and another of shrimps, stood on the table: when he had finished reading, he ate a few shrimps. He had bought them from the same street barrow as the eel. For days he had been eating as much marine foods as his stomach consented to take.

"Fry the eel if you two want supper," he invited Eva; "or shall we keep it for breakfast? I'm going to bed." He had descended a step from the hallucinatory stage though his gaze still wobbled. "You two sleep here!" He pointed to the sad divan. "Close the windows and the rats won't come in."

"We won't see rats," Val said, helping him to haul down the cradle.

Still there was time to escape. Applying lipstick at the shaving mirror propped on the mantelshelf books, she stared astonished at herself. All this was fantastic and beyond her province: this unknown boy, this squalor, beringed about with a fireworks

attraction though it was, this flouting of wisdom and prudence—none of it was up her street. Why was she so conscious of this young man, even when the drunken Iolo, undisputed monarch of this kingdom, exacted full attention? It was as though years had peeled away from her and a forgotten identity breathed into vitality. She knew why she had asked Iolo, drunk though he was, to read from the poem: his voice brought back the rough dark green hills of Bylau and a spectre of herself speeding below them on impassioned errands.

"I can't sleep properly on floors," Iolo wailed, pulling off his Salvation Army jersey.

Or was she being sentimental . . . or worse? She turned from the mirror and, while Iolo undressed, stood looking at the girl of pale wood. The extraordinary purity of the statue struck her again. This room was not squalid.

"A sailor's net hammock would be simpler for you than that thing, Iolo," she said. Val stood taut, hands confidently on hips, looking over-potential.

Iolo sat himself in his shirt under a rough brown blanket, pulled one set of ropes while Val pulled the other, and the cradle went up successfully halfway to the ceiling. They jerked the locks safe. "My jug!" Iolo bawled, pointing to under the manger. He hung the jug on a hook screwed into the cradle's side and snuggled down without further fuss. "Put the light out," he grunted.

Eva, sedately, said to Val: "I live near the British Museum."

"Convenient for the Museum." He shut the windows, re-opened an upper sash; and switched off the light. He moved with a swift grace which, now

that their host was withdrawn, took on a noticeably stealthy assurance.

She stood delaying. At first glance, in The Goat, he had seemed contained efficiently inside himself, like an animal of good breed that will never stray beyond a fixed schedule of behaviour. Was there also an element of danger, of touch-me-at-your-peril? The non-yielding kind that take their pleasure, pay a certain amount of formal tribute, and give nothing of their private self—*cannot* give? She stood delaying. Yellowish runs of light came from the windows, the nervous glowings of a city. The girl of pale wood could be discerned, her eel indeed a mythological serpent now. Iolo breathed with the solid regularity of a drunk in well-earned sleep. Val returned from the landing outside and swiftly undressed.

"Come," he whispered. She had sat down with a cigarette. "Not sure whether you like me?"

"Yes."

"How can you tell so soon?" He jumped into the divan bed, hurling back its cover and tossing the two cushions to its head.

"Who are you?"

"Ah, not that! Not tonight."

She undressed. She told herself there would be no danger from him: it threatened only from herself. In the narrow confines of the bed things were not comfortable. Within a short while there was a sharp, creaking sound, and the lower end of the mattress collapsed through the wire base to the floor: the wooden frame had split.

"We can go to my flat," she said impatiently.

"*No.*" He heaved out the mattress in fury and

flung it on the floor, threw the cushions, spread the two unexpectedly expensive and clean blankets (probably a patron's gift to Iolo). She shivered and, in dazed wonder, thought of her own bedroom with its luxurious bed, and of Mrs. Gosbee's worshipped new vacuum cleaner. Yet somehow she did not want Val there. That room belonged to other matters.

"Get in!" he said in a swearing voice, and she obeyed.

She woke to find herself alone on the mattress and bright sunshine pouring from the windows. His clothes had gone. It was nine by the small clock standing askew on the books; her usual time for waking. Automatically she remembered that Alec Dark was telephoning at eleven-thirty, to fix the afternoon. She decided to put him off. For a time she lay bemused. An odd sensation possessed her. The past became the past. The thought of Alec and the others was unwelcome, even nice old bedridden Mr. Stevens—it was his evening tonight too—who wanted only the novels of—what was the name—Surtees?—read to him while she sat naked in a winged armchair, the fee for the hour a five-pound note and a half bottle of champagne left on the hall table by the butler.

Why had Val disappeared like this? Had he wakened late for his work? Strange that she had not wakened too. She imagined him prowling silent as a shadow. Her eyes searched for her handbag. She got up from the mattress at last and, a little ashamed, looked in the bag. While she dressed she called up blithely to the gently swaying cradle: "Iolo! Iolo!"

It was a clean morning full of sinewy light: one of those unstinting mornings of renewal. She wanted to stay to tidy the room, fetch in flowers from Covent Garden market, sit with good coffee at a freshly laundered tablecloth and listen to Iolo talk. She peeped at the MS. assembled on the table, but the lines did not yield as much sense or pleasure as when Iolo recited them.

"*Io* . . . lo, *Io* . . . lo!" she called. the new day alive in her voice. The smile of the girl of pale wood was more inwards in the lucid morning light. She propped up the collapsed end of the wired bed-frame with a large empty canister labelled Glaxo Baby Food which, surprised, she found in the cupboard. "*Io* . . . lo!"

Grunting, he peered down from the cradle. "Any money in the post?"

"I can't see any letters. Does the landlady push them under your door? I'll make tea."

"Where's that shifty bastard?"

"Gone. Why do you say shifty?"

"They're all the same in this city," he said darkly. "It's due for from-above punishment."

She was assembling the crocks in the manger for washing and had already placed several grease-caked knives in a saucepan of soapy water on the gas-ring. There was a sudden flare of light.

"Fire, fire!" roared Iolo. "The fire-engine, quick! My manuscript!" Agilely, a stout monkey, he swung down from the cradle. The bone handles of the knives had caught alight; she had turned the gas up too high. The fiercely tall flare abruptly vanished. There was a nasty smell. Iolo stood with his manuscript thrust under his shirt.

"I'll buy you some knives," she said, standing arrested by this peculiar incident.

Iolo dressed grumbling. She prepared a token breakfast of tea, bread and jam. It was past ten o'clock when they heard the street door knocker banged. Presently a woman's voice screamed up the stairs: "Mr. Hancock, Mr. Hancock, someone to see you."

Galvanised again, Iolo sped to the cupboard, rummaged, found a flask, and thrust it into the hole in Hermes's side. "One of those drunkards from the Nightshade, I expect," he whispered. "Or from the B.B.C." Footsteps sounded outside; there was a tap on the door. "See who it is," he hissed. "Say you are my aunt from Wales and I'm ill." But the caller had already opened the door.

It was a man. Iolo, nabbed, sat him in the horse-hair chair. A greyish, rather ill-looking man in a belted raincoat, nabbed himself in another way. He had come from the local National Health Insurance office. Why hadn't Mr. Hancock replied to the last three letters—one of them registered—sent him at this address? Did Mr. Hancock realise that he would lose all benefits if his insurance card was not returned with fifty-two stamps fixed and cancelled thereon? Furthermore, Mr. Hancock might be liable to prosecution. The official eye roved round the room assessingly, lingering on Eva at the manger, and on the statue of wood. Hermes smiled.

Iolo, the fee for his new poem threatened, became truculent. "Why should I waste my spit on fifty-two stamps?" he demanded, short thick legs straddling the table chair. "What have *I* to do with

the National Health? One would imagine the State would be glad to get me off its books. . . . Benefits?" he began to boom. "What benefits have you got for *me*?"

The official, adapting himself to this with likeable foxiness, intoned: "Doctor, spectacle-maker, dentist, midwife, undertaker. As a self-employed person, Class 2, you are not entitled to unemployment benefit, of course, but should you ever need a little toupee——" He allowed himself this little jest, his own frivolity gleaming delicately from false teeth.

"I am going to die soon! I saw it last night in my vomit." Iolo went to Hermes and reached inside for the half-bottle of Grand Marnier. "Glasses, auntie, please," he called; "the small ones. . . . My Aunt Esther," he presented Eva to the official, "who sends me five-shilling postal orders and brings me country eggs fresh from the nest." He had got going again, pouring the elixir. "Zeus eggs, Osiris eggs, Leda eggs, Noah's Ark eggs, Paschal eggs, Brancusi eggs, eggs from an unstamped hen. I will not eat the genesis of life when it is stamped with an official mark," he declared. "Welfare State eggs."

"This is neither here nor there, Mr. Hancock," the official reproached, taking the glass of Grand Marnier nevertheless, and sipping readily. Eva refused one and went on washing the crockery. "You cause our clerks extra work, Mr. Hancock. You are one of our headaches. You've disappeared from four addresses. Yet we hear you frequently on the wireless."

Those 'we' were, of course, in coalition with the Income Tax termites, all working together in

underground energy; one from the I.T. nest had already burrowed a way into this citadel. "I couldn't afford underwear last winter," Iolo grumbled, bull eyes more protuberant. No doubt of it now, this investigator knew about the coming B.B.C. programme; they discovered everything. "The State should exempt neurotics from these fusses. I am self-employed," he agreed, "but do I live in luxury?" He pointed to Hermes. "I have had to accept work repairing tailors' dummies. A poet must eat. He must also be free as a bird or as the original man."

"What is a free man, Mr. Hancock? Surely it is impossible to be one? Just as no man can be born without parents. There are no Adams now." He drained his glass. "The State is benignant towards us. Please do not think of its representative as an enemy. All we ask is our stamps. You disarrange our files!" he pleaded, allowing his glass to be refilled. "I shall be expected to report your case at the office," he added, doggedly rejecting the other enchantments of this warlock.

"I was dreaming of my boyhood last night," Iolo said, sunk in reverie. "I'm always dreaming of my boyhood. Do you think it prevents me from growing up?"

"Well, you appear to take your responsibilities lightly. We have a country to run, Mr. Hancock, we must all pull our weight."

Iolo thumped his ungainly chest. "The weight I pull around would kill most men! It's about to kill me, too."

The N.H.I. man, now almost a guest, ventured: "Perhaps you could be preserved by submission to

the habits we all have to endure?" Hermes, probably disturbed by Iolo's thumps, fell as though fainting to the floor. "That's a beautiful statue you've got there!" the official resumed, pointing to Cedric's nude.

"Done by a bunking skunk. My young lady, name of Ann, sat for it. I tell you what, chum. Report to your office that I'll send them the fifty-two stamps when the statue is sold. A man from Bond Street is coming to see it on Friday. Ought to get at least fifty quid for it."

"It belongs to you, then?"

"That skunk," Iolo shouted, "has worn my clothes, picked my pocket, rogered my girl, belittled my work, and forgiven me for insulting him. He gave me that statue as a peace offering."

The official got up appeased. "I will report that you are about to earn money and your stamped card is to be delivered in due course." He smiled approvingly at the statue.

"In due course," Iolo nodded, also eased. "Everything delicious in life is a deliverance in due course. . . . Meanwhile," he lowered his voice at the door confidentially, *"Be drunken. Drunken with what? With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you choose. But be drunken."*

"The mortgage on my house in Reigate is not paid off yet, Mr. Hancock," said the N.H.I. man, perhaps not recognising the quotation. He skipped down the stairs. Iolo slammed the door.

"No peace for work!" he whimpered. "Are you going, Eva? Come back later and fry the eel."

"I can't. You ought to live in the country, Iolo." She laid two pounds from her bag on the table. "Or

shall Auntie buy you a few National Health stamps?"

"I'll pay you back in The Goat on Monday," he said strictly, sitting at the table with his manuscript.

"Who is this Val?" she asked, wanting her bath.

"Oh, just a hanger-on. In commercial art, I think. I see him around. Got a mind, and no morals. . . . Looking for an aunt too, perhaps," he added mischievously. "I've seen him about with a girl called Oriana."

"Do they live together?"

"I expect so. On and off, probably."

In the cab she was impatient with herself. But all that day Val was present in her activities, less as a remembered physical image—a hallucinatory element, which Iolo usually brewed, hung about that—but as an elusively haunting flavour woven into her own being. It possessed a faintly anæsthetic effect. All the afternoon, her earlier vitality in Iolo's room gone, she lay on her red sofa. Mrs. Gosbee asked if she was unwell. She had put off Alec Dark and rang Mr. Stevens's butler to say she was unable to make the journey to Queen's Gate that evening.

At nine o'clock she walked to The Goat. She had never visited it on two consecutive evenings before.

Every time the door opened and still it was not Val she had a depressing feeling of relief. She sat there until ten-thirty. Iolo did not appear either, nor any of his usual friends: probably a studio party somewhere. On the way home the gloom and relief persisted. A man with brief-case and

umbrella followed her from Bedford Square into Gower Street and presently drew up with: "Good evening. Is this the way to Euston station?" Curbing her fury, she made it clear he would be late for his train if he did not hurry. For the thousandth time she asked herself what there was in her appearance that made them solicit thus; she dressed discreetly, with an addiction to stout mackintoshes, and cultivated for the streets an air of unseeing preoccupation.

The gloom deepened as she climbed the flights of stairs to her flat. At night the house was oppressively dead. The basement and first two floors of offices were deserted after six o'clock: Mrs. Gosbee, occupying the two attic rooms, always went to bed at ten o'clock and started cleaning the offices at seven a.m.: the staircase time-switch lights went out too soon, leaving one to stumble in darkness. She would buy a small house: the couple she owned in Kensington were too big: the time had come to settle finally in a house.

Outside her flat door she could hear the telephone and got into a rage that she couldn't find the key-hole at once. When she burst into the hall the ringing ceased.

Her number was in the directory. But did he know her surname? Had he met Iolo and asked for it? The late call might have been from a dozen people. Scrambling eggs, which she found she did not want, she waited for the ringing. It did not come.

A cottage-type house, completely renovated. All this furniture, good though it was, would have to go. A fresh start, with modern stuff and a slap-up

kitchen such as you saw in those magazines. A small garden at the back which she could learn to cultivate from a book. She'd ask Joe Gascoigne about bulbs; he was in the trade. Lying in bed at last with a novel Vincent O'Connor had brought her (since she had said: "I'm a big reader at nights," he always brought novels from his near-by office), she realised the heavy solitude of the house for the first time. . . . The telephone rang. Her hand flew to the receiver at the bedside, paused above it, lifted it at last.

"Eva? . . . I ran into Iolo in the Nightshade and got your number. Can I come along?" His voice was thickly blurred.

She heard herself say, calmly: "No."

"Why not?"

"Have I to give a reason? It's after one o'clock. I was asleep."

"Is that Eva speaking?"

"It is. Oughtn't you to be home in bed?"

"That's why I've rung you. Are you alone?"

"I am, and intend to remain alone." She replaced the receiver with a rapidity which, like the pomp in her voice, astonished herself.

Half an hour later she was still vainly trying to read when her front door bell rang. She lay in horror. It was her rule never to admit visitors after nine p.m., and certainly not anyone without an appointment. She got out of bed, put on a wrap, and sat down to light a cigarette, irritated by her trembling fingers. The bell rang again. She walked into the kitchen and tidied up the dishes. How many times had she told Mrs. Gosbee *not* to put the rubbish bin inaccessibly under the sink? She

examined the food cupboard. A few minutes later the telephone rang.

"I'm in a box round the corner. Are you angry with me for leaving this morning without a word?"

"No. I thought it surprising but had forgotten about it."

"I had to be at the studio early. You looked so fast asleep and in need of it, and I thought Iolo would waken too and let fly about the broken bed—he's got a temper."

"You left me to face him?" she said, still grand if petty.

"He adores you. Naturally I was to blame. I adore you too, darling. Will you come down and open the door?"

"Not on your life." She replaced the receiver. The self-congratulation depressed her still more.

The next afternoon a bunch of red tulips, of economical size, was delivered to her door with a shop card inscribed with his name and address. She plodded about the flat seeking domestic tasks. There were four telephone calls and to each, even poor Mr. Steyens's butler, she pleaded indisposition. Thought of all her old friends could not be extricated from her condition: their regard and devotion, earned through long, regular association and the sense of safety she gave, seemed tedious and without merit. She spent the afternoon poring over neglected bank statements, cheque-book counterfoils, the list of her holdings copied into a sixpenny notebook, and plans to move into a house. Over a cup of tea and an allowance of one chocolate éclair (in her time she could eat six at a sitting) she dis-

covered that all this pointed to a need to retire. She had become tired.

When he rang at six o'clock anger possessed her. "Thank you for the tulips," she barked. "But I don't want to see you."

"Oh, come now! Are you sure?"

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Well . . . the night before last."

"I think you must be conceited." Before she could stop herself she added: "Of course, you are very young."

"Older than the rocks on which I sit both spiritually and materially. I've been given notice to quit my room on Saturday."

"Did you imagine you could live here?"

"I *dreamed* of it," he admitted. "Can you blame me?"

Angry with herself for discussing the point at all, she said: "Surely one of those girls I see around in The Goat can offer suitable accommodation?"

"One has: Oriana. Do you know her?"

"No, I don't. And I must ring off now. I'm preparing to go out." She banged the receiver down.

At nine she went to The Goat. Again neither Iolo nor Val came in. There was a collection of talkative intellectuals, bohemians, or whatever they were, convivially hobnobbing with local riff-raff, Service men on leave and spare-time girls on the fringe of harlotry. She felt bleakly unbelonging. A friend of Iolo's whom she knew—with four other men he edited a poetry monthly of six pages—came in and presently spoke to her. His eye was besotted. He said Iolo had been in the Nightingale earlier; a party had developed there to give him the courage

to go to Birmingham, where he was to give a lecture on Shelley. Determined not to mention Val, she asked if a girl called Oriana had been there.

"Oriana?" He pointed. "She's over by the bar with Peke Blake and Oliver the Louse. Want to meet her?"

She shook her head. Oriana, examined through shifting groups of people, stood with a half-pint mug in her hand. Her reddishly handsome aspect overcame the association of grubbiness usually present with The Goat habitues, especially when they were pale or insufficiently baptized into this milieu. She was out of the student stage, had an air of full self-discovery, and the consequent cleanliness gave her poise. Her copperish hair stuck out at the back like a young horse's smartly-cropped tail, its exuberance contrasting with the philosophic calm of her face. She looked without humour, would not be passionate but forthright, solidly helpful in a crisis, and knowledgeable in mundane living. She was already a sort of mother. Eva pulled on her frail gloves.

"Not going, are you?" The poetry editor jerked into awareness. "Come to the Nightshade?" he begged.

"Was a boy called Val there?"

"I expect so. . . . Lot of them slumped about with their mouths open for more. . . . Don't go," he whimpered. "Nightshade. Baronet chap on the run from Oxford paying for everybody. Promised to back our next number. Iolo's giving me a poem." He thumped the table. "Have a drink."

If she came to The Goat oftener she would earn the reputation of intellectuals' moll: especially as

she could stand on her own feet financially. She got out, not looking at Oriana again as she passed. No longer an abstraction with a name, Oriana existed in attractive though reddish flesh, young.

He rang the next evening. She said: "No, I still can't see you. I'm busy. My sister is staying with me."

"How long for?"

"Until Saturday," she replied, foolishly.

"That's the day I've got to leave my room."

"What has that got to do with it? Surely one of your friends . . . Iolo . . . what's her name?—Oriana?"

"I don't quite approve of Iolo's domestic habits. Oriana . . . well——" It was as if his voice gave a shrug.

In a panic she demanded: "Why do you keep on telephoning me?"

"Besides the obvious reason, something in your voice tells me to. The telephone is a sensitive instrument, darling. All truthful voice and no lying face."

"Excuse me." She lifted her head and shouted loudly: *"Linda! Someone at the door. Will you go down?* . . . I must ring off now. We have a visitor."

"Write me by Saturday? Or a telegram before noon? Don't drive me to Oriana's . . ."

"Good-bye."

The stresses of the following three days became more and more magnified. Saturday loomed threateningly. She saw no one and on the telephone lied like a trooper to valued old friends. In a moment of harsh realism she told herself she was

sacrificing some thirty pounds in one week. Poor Matthew Prior complained bitterly: his wife had been especially trying and they now communicated by notes left on the mantelpiece.

"Well, I'm going through hell too," she replied. "I'm ill. I might have to get an operation." Matthew was startled and much put out. Eva ill!

She told herself it was a mental illness. What had caused it? Had this menace been lying in wait for her over the years? What did this obsession with a worthless—yes, worthless and trivial—young man mean? Was *this* love? Born of a casual encounter in one night! Had she forgotten, for all her experience, what love was like? By Friday evening she felt distinctly unwell.

She lay morosely on the red sofa. Up to five o'clock, when Vincent O'Connor left his office for his week-end with his mother, she had battled with herself about telephoning him. Friday was always his evening. Vincent, a widower, had long been her favourite. She had known him for twelve years; he was over sixty now. At one time, such was their concord, marriage had hovered latently in the air, and when one Friday he brought a diamond brooch, together with a trace of regret in his manner, she knew he had reached the decision that she was unsuitable for the social duties the union entailed. The comfort she exuded was not enough, or her miraculous skin (Iolo referred to her face as a 'dish of fresh five-shilling nectarines on a summer evening'). Her past activities would sooner or later snuffle into sight; especially in Sussex, where Vincent intended settling in his retirement. She had remained basically common, quick though she

had been, ever since Mr. Dai, to assimilate nice ways and styles from her gentlemen in their ordinary social moments: women would see through her.

She sipped, without enjoyment, a glass of Mr. Stevens's champagne, usually kept for visitors. Why had she been so partial to middle-aged and even elderly gentlemen? Was it because Mr. Dai, so kind and of her own race, had given her a taste for them just when she had put her hair up? (In addition to teaching her fresh and young mind to understand them?) Very likely. Also, they were not troublesome. . . . Wasn't it, too, that she had this mania to be kind? Men at the turn of their lives, and later, seemed to need kindness much more than young men. A complicated sort of loneliness came with middle age. She gave them, work-weary or harassed by an unsatisfactory home life as often they were, the means to remember old dreams. If that was a virtue! . . . She jumped off the sofa. To hell with them!

They had become a lazy habit, a docility, a safety, a sleep. They had turned her into an indolent slut.

She went into the kitchen and poured the rest of Mr. Stevens's champagne into the sink. Drink went to her head quickly. And she didn't want to weaken and go to The Goat tonight. A cinema would calm her. Next week she would set about buying a house. Walking to a cinema with a bag of marshmallows, she decided that alternatively she might run down to see Linda. Llewellyn should be home from the university at the end of next week. She doted on him: a mutual doting, she thought. He was all a young man should be. He

would never lack for money while she was alive, and when she was dead continuance of his regard of her was (as far as one could tell) guaranteed.

On Saturday, after a determined morning of shopping and the treat of an expensive lunch out, she returned home at two-thirty and, from the hall of the flat, heard voices in the sitting-room. Adelaide Gosbee's ramshackle laugh was distinct. She listened at the door and withdrew to the stairs outside.

A second, and final, chance! Choice, choice! Oh, but this was making too much of a fuss. A mere boy! One of a gay, sharp-edged brood too, not some neurotic young man of the respectable suburbs tangled up inside himself and perhaps ending melodramatically in suicide or other terrible nuisance, such as harebrained Queenie Law got herself caught with, the police questioning her after the fool had stolen from his employers to give her jewellery when all poor Queenie wanted was affection! This Val was well out of the fog often afflicting young men: such as he took a clean jump over the difficult years: he would never go to pieces over a woman in the old-fashioned way. Why was she hesitating? She could get rid of him expertly enough if he became too much. She slammed the outer door and crossed the hall humming.

Mrs. Gosbee came out, closing the sitting-room door behind her. "A visitor's been waiting half an hour. Said it was important, so I let him in. We been talking about boxer dogs. Used to breed 'em on Bodmin Moor, he says." Skittish approval sat on the square jaw that looked so law-abiding. "Going to buy a dog, are you, dear?"

"Did you offer him a drink?"

"He asked for one, poor thing, and I gave him a cracker and scrap of cheese with it. That sort don't eat regular. Just a bundle of nerves. Artist, is he?"

"Artist, my eye. He's a tough."

"Well, it's cheerful to see a bit of young stuff about for a change, dear," said Mrs. Gosbee, going off to her own quarters.

He sat on the sofa with a gin, jumped up, and laid his head in her bosom exactly as Iolo had done in The Goat. "Thought I was never going to rest on these peonies again, darling," he breathed.

"Neither did I." She scrutinised his hair like an institute matron.

"I asked your housekeeper for a drink. I've been the whole morning packing up."

"So much stuff? Where is it?"

"Victoria Left Luggage."

"You can stay in my tiny spare room for a week while you find yourself a proper room."

"I need rest," he sighed, sinking back on the sofa, "and comfort. Bring me your pink peonies, Eva. Make a great big fuss of me. I'm starving."

She cooked and darned for him, bought him underwear and shoes, and treated a callous under his right foot. Her former life was finally abolished. Vincent O'Connor called one afternoon without arrangement and, after she had admitted the association with a young man, gave her a severe lecture. Other friends were bewildered. Mr. Stevens's butler telephoned constantly and seemed to blame her for his master's irritation. The loss in revenue was considerable. Although Val worked

for an advertising agency as a free lance, it was surprising how money vanished. He had no qualms about accepting two or three pounds when he set out for an evening. She would not accompany him and never visited The Goat again.

It was sometimes a relief to spend the evenings alone; she discovered that after long years of living alone the irruption of another person into one's domestic life needs patience and skill to bear it. His presence became like a mirror placed under a strident light in which she was continually forced to stare. She often had to lie down on the sofa.

In due course Mrs. Gosbee remarked: "You made a mistake in letting that little duck come into your pond. You can't afford such antics, can you?"

Yet, late at nights, she would wait for his return with an accumulative nervous anxiety that made her pace the rooms. She asked herself if it was jealousy that devoured her, this physical sensation which her mind repudiated as idiotic: she had no right to jealousy. These long evenings alone turned her, for the first time in her life, to close self-scrutiny. She discovered many aspects of herself. There was a compensatory sense of liberation in these advantages of knowledge, yet they had no power over the tumults of passion and anxiety as she visualised him roaming from pub to club, club to studio party. She began to see herself as two distinct beings, one of them alarming as a lunatic, the other watching carefully. Her old life of clear harmony, safe with her half a dozen mature gentlemen, began to be remote: she had to make an effort to remember the faces of one or two of them.

One night during the fourth week of his stay he

arrived back very late. It was after two o'clock. She was still up, pretending to read one of Vincent's books—the old faithful continued to send them round from his office, probably waiting for her return to normality. She had flung herself on the sofa when she heard him come in. He was sober, which made this late arrival worse, and he would never question her staying up for his return.

"A good book?" he asked, brightly disregarding. Often it was noon before he got up.

"Where have you been?"

"Eric's. A bunch of the usuals there. An art-master from some provincial school on the prowl for non-abstract art. He made a pass at Ann and when they were walking down the stairs Iolo dropped a potted cactus on his head. There was a row."

She unlinked a rope of shell-like gold blobs from her throat and idly played with them, wonderfully calm. "At least I get time to think, Val. When are you going to find yourself a room? You know I've never thought it suitable for you to live here."

"From what point of view?" he demanded, argumentative but not resentful.

Her knees shifted uncomfortably. "It looks bad."

"To whom or what? . . . Oh, well, it looks bad. That's all right by me. Do *you* admire the people and system it looks bad to? If so, darling, why haven't you married into them and started a dynasty of what looks good?" Squatting on the floor beside the sofa, he looked like a young husband deciding to ridicule gratuitous tantrums. "All you ought to ask yourself is: 'Am I enjoying myself?' "

"Not at the moment," she said, recovering from the attack.

"I mean with me *on the whole*. Am I a good and sound lover who brings you interest and spiritual if not material reward?"

That he was addressing her as though he was twenty years her senior did not irritate, and somehow toned down the guilt. "I didn't expect to enjoy myself all the time," she began; "I'm not young or conceited enough to think we live for nothing but enjoyment——" She fumbled, turning her head from the snare of sight of him, and knowing she was evading acceptance of the realisation that he had come too late, that in some mysterious way he was a penalty, that she ought to send him packing at once, even tonight, and face the loneliness and longing that would turn her life—only for a time?—into a desolate muddle of re-adaptation far worse than this fear of yielding to his terms. Why didn't she accept? It was foolish to expect from him the conventional behaviour of a recently-acquired husband when their whole association was irremediably outlandish and perilous. "I suppose I want you to go to protect myself," she resumed in a small voice, forcing herself to look at him again.

He smiled; her mountain was his molehill. "Get your mind going a bit more, girl! You're only struggling against me some of the time. Here we are," he admonished further, "living in a totally stupid world, and yet you are frightened of it and kow-tow to the stupidity—*you*! . . . What do you want of me? Marriage?—don't scowl like that: marriage would be a snap of our fingers that I would relish. A romantic sitting-about with you

every evening looking into each other's eyes? Not for me. Good earthy sex is what I want, and you've got it." He paused: she looked at him silently. "While we're on the subject," he resumed, "I appreciate your giving up your staid business friends for my sake——"

"Not for your sake; my own."

"But I don't want you to lie about moping for them. Only don't let me find them in the house after sunset. Better still, never. You've already worked hard enough for the old trouts; you're well-off; you need a treat."

"And you must find a room by next week," she said, outwardly calm still.

"What is shocking is your need for self-punishment. It must be your puritan upbringing asserting itself late. Even Iolo's got a bit of it in him." He eased up to beside the sofa and put his hand on her thigh, his head by her shoulder. "Rooms for the likes of myself are not so easily come by. Landladies take one look at me and shake their sagacious heads. Even Ma Gosbee, I notice, is beginning to flap about like a badly brought up goose. Can't you tell her it's unnecessary for me to get to the studio until the afternoon and a growing boy like me needs mornings in bed?"

"You're taking your work too casually," she said, side-tracked. "I'm bad for you. You must get more work. I'll ask my friend Queenie Law to introduce you to Horatio Harl; I don't know him well enough myself."

"Harl's agency certainly needs new blood," he said indolently. "Flowers from which of them?" he asked, indicating the hot-house white hydrangeas

arranged in a heavy crystal jar standing on the round table at the sofa's foot. "Grapes, too, for the ailing one?" The purple opulence of the bunch lying on a plate under the flowers held almost a rank ferocity. "Surely nobody *eats* such grapes?"

"Oh . . . they arrived," she murmured, preoccupied, "from someone."

"You've got too much natural taste to buy such showy horrors yourself."

His occasional censoriousness, half teasing, half serious, seldom irritated her. Arranging the string of gold beads on his head as he lolled under her shoulder, she asked: "Was Oriana at Eric's studio tonight?"

"No. But I saw her at the Nightshade earlier. Darling, it's got about that I'm living with you. You shouldn't have bought me this shirt. It's costing me a lot in rounds of drinks."

"Is Oriana upset?"

"She'd consider it pandering to be upset. But she wants to meet you."

"Have you ever slept with her?"

"Only in drink." He took the chaplet of beads from his hair and dropped it in the pocket of the much-worn leather jacket he was so fond of. "Since then we've got this queer hostility-attracted thing. I was surprised to find her pure. She takes her job at that clinic seriously and her attitude to sex is hygienic. I think she wants children."

Pushing him away, she rose from the sofa. "Look at the time! We've got off the subject. I *do* mean you to be out by next week."

"I'm so happy here." He watched her unperturbed. "For the first time I feel safe." Rolling

over the carpet he gripped her ankles as she walked to the door; for a light-weight his grip was strong. She looked down on him. The flat face, smiling privately, had its tenacious Japanese look. She thought that but for his intelligence and sensibility he would be a delinquent or some kind of crook.

"What were you going to do with those beads?"

"Give them to Oriana. She's having a birthday party on Sunday. You are invited. Iolo will be there."

"You can give her the beads, with my love and sympathy. I shan't go. Would she like a cake too?"

"Are you forcing me to choose?" He still held her ankles. The quality of untouchability, of not being besmirched, gleamed in his face.

"Choose her, Val, choose her."

"I should always be running back to knock on your door. A nuisance for both of us." He loosened his grip as though the scrutiny of her from below had reassured him.

"I'll ring Queenie Law tomorrow. I know she has a room in her house on Hampstead Heath; she can take you in."

"Hampstead Heath!" He sprang up. "I'm not a dog."

Later he crept noiselessly into her room in the dark. He had a liking for appearing there in that marauding way. Sometimes she had wondered if he had been in trouble with the police as a youth. He was reticent, in a dismissing way, about his past with his deeply religious parents. She assumed he had followed a traditional reaction from an over-severe childhood. It seemed that he hated his boat-builder Cornish father, fifty when his only child

was born; his mother died when he was fourteen.

"She got to *like* obeying him!" he said once. "When he stopped her taking her glass of chemist's port for anæmia I remember the sickening look of submission she had. He starved her to death and glory and opened a tin of sardines for our meal after the funeral. We were not at all poor, but there was never enough food in the house. He tried to get me apprenticed to a printer of religious tracts in Plymouth, ha! I told him I intended going into a brewery. Queer that he didn't really battle with me! I remember him saying: 'You will come round.'" He held little contact with his father now.

That he prowled into her room secretly in the dark was (she often pondered on it) necessary to him and indicated that he was not so liberated as he imagined? She was sin. Every time he crept there was it a blow at the old man?

He nestled into her arm. "You and your Hampstead Heath!" he chided. She made a move to thrust him away, paused, and was lost.

Did he know his worth and power as a lover? Was he aware of the wrench in her when he left the bed? She could not sleep for what remained of that night. Light soon edged the window curtains. A bird twittered in the square. Presently she got up, drew the curtains, took a jug of water to the plants in the window box, and sat there breathing the new pale-tinted morning. Across the street-turning lay a glimpse of the square with its fresh-budded trees, a branch of wild cherry in flower, and an aquatint row of houses fragile in the undeveloped light. The twittering bird became more

robust, his clatter neither taking the day for granted nor caring what it would bring in the way of cats creeping murderously out of basements.

She asked herself why she couldn't take what was offered. Ignore the shocking problem and the disorder, be blind to the grins. . . . But he must not live in the house. Why had she been so weak last night? She could have locked her door. Firm action was important just now. Why didn't that girl Oriana put up a fight? Overweighted with too much education, probably, and underweighted with sex—or was it that one disciplined the other? A state of things she herself never had to contend with!

At ten o'clock, while Val still slept, she telephoned Queenie Law, and at eleven left a note for Val telling him she had to go out for the day, but would expect him to be at the flat for a drink and to meet a friend at six-thirty. She went to Kew Gardens, and was back at five. Queenie arrived soon after, accepted a small drink of tomato juice, and listened like a welfare officer to the tale of distress.

Stiffly upright, as regards sitting posture, Queenie Law never smiled, and she spoke without unduly moving her jaw, preserving the perfect oval of her lovely phantom's face from strain. Thin, pale, both idol and the priestess serving it, she always wore severe black and chaste white collars and cuffs, with no jewellery. None of it had won her the much-publicised breach of promise case with a rich scoundrel or prevented a suburban coroner at the inquest on a young man from observing that the deceased had formed a very un-

wholesome liaison which was bound to lead him to perdition.

"Eva," she pronounced, "if you're trying to palm off a spot of bother on me, there's nothing doing! Young men are more trouble than they're worth. They chase one so and make exhibitions."

"But it's only a question of renting your top room to him." Eva bridled. "The room has a north light, he can work quietly there, and when Horatio Harl calls I want you to let them meet. . . . He's entirely taken up with me," she insisted. "But night after night here——"

"You're looking younger for it," Queenie said tartly. "But have nothing to do with them, Eva."

"I'll pay you a good rent. Val is struggling to make his way and had a hard childhood. The quiet of your house will be good for him. . . . Look, you can take my place with Mr. Stevens at Queen's Gate! His butler asked me if I had a friend who would suit. I left off there in the middle of a book."

Queenie's mouth opened a nut's width in silent exclamation. She had always been envious of the easy Mr. Stevens's commitment. When Val arrived she gave him the steadily blank look of a statue and after a few minutes nodded at Eva. "Val," Eva said, formally, "Mrs. Law can take you as a tenant. I know the room. It will suit you and your work."

Standing before the Adam fireplace like a possible master of the house not yet certain of his legacy, he only uttered a vindictive "Ha!"

"I'll get the room ready by Monday." Formal as her hostess, Queenie picked up her black gloves and bowed to him. On the stairs she whispered to Eva: "That one!—he's safe enough. Why are you so

worried? He's practically one of us. It's the quiet home-bird ones that are dangerous. All the same I agree it's best not to let them live under the same roof if one is in love." She meant that a mask couldn't be worn so perpetually with any comfort. "You'll arrange it with Mr. Stevens?"

Val was squatting on the hearthrug when she returned, the bottle of gin beside him. "Queenie's stuffed with sawdust," he said. "You looked like one of Rubens's honest women beside her on that sofa."

"You'll go to her house, won't you?"

"Yes." He smiled affably.

She looked down her nose. A shade of depression seemed to settle on it. "I didn't go into the question of food. But I know she has a daily woman who cooks. *She* can't cook."

"No. I expect she stuffs her bed with shavings and helps herself to one occasionally."

"I suppose you are going out tonight?"

"Why? You're not ill, are you? There's a high colour in your cheeks."

"I shall go to see my sister in Wales soon," she said.

"I should. Take me with you."

"Certainly not. It's time you did more work. Queenie will introduce you to Mr. Harl."

"Has she worked for him? She rather looks like an unfrocked mannequin."

"I'm going to the pictures tonight." She moved to go to the kitchen, where Mrs. Gosbee had already prepared the wherewithal of a substantial meal. He strode after her and, at the door, pressed his hands round her throat. A flare of rage possessed her; she

gripped his wrists and forced the hands away with ease.

"What's the matter?" he asked casually, and crossed the room for a cigarette.

They ate the meal in careful sociability. He went off to The Goat. That night she went to bed early and locked her door. In the morning she found he had not returned at all: he rang up at midday and said he had been taken to a party at Shepperton and stayed the night there. When he arrived that evening she asked no questions. He walked about the flat whistling. She told him that Queenie had telephoned to verify the arrangements and to say the room was ready at once if needed—a lie. "No, I'll go on Monday," he said. Four days remained. He went out immediately after the meal. In the bathroom a garishly-checked shirt was flung on the floor; she left it there, treading around it: it seemed to possess a strange power.

On Sunday afternoon, after three days of this polite armistice, she asked him when he was going to pack his things for the move: in an hour he was leaving for Oriana's birthday party (the gold beads in his pocket). "Oh, tomorrow," he said, attentively reading one of Vincent's more unreadable new books. This shrug-of-the-shoulders attitude to what life was bringing belonged, she supposed, to the casual philosophy of his set: a way of by-passing the disagreeable. The gripping of her throat on the evening of Queenie's visit belonged to something else in his temperament. Since then he had made no approaches to her and she wondered if it was necessary to lock her door at nights. He chattered of his work and associates in the Chancery Lane

studio where he spent the afternoons. His manner was that of a man who has lived years in her flat. He went off to Oriana's party briskly at six o'clock.

She was inured to the loneliness of the evenings now. But once or twice she had been tempted to announce to those friends who still telephoned that she had come out of purdah. Sometimes her former life even seemed to possess a peaceful charm such as exudes from a long-closed old album of faded photographs. Respect for some of her gentlemen replaced the good-humoured but vaguely contemptuous tolerance which, since Val had come into her life, she discovered she felt for them. Now she herself understood loneliness, inner solitudes, the humbug of stiff upper lips, the pathos of discipline and domestic boredom. She had supplied those men with some sort of compensatory glamour. And now she was in their shoes! Poor things. . . .

Yet, not one of them had made the effort to cast caution to the winds or really howled for independence, not one had so much as suggested a flaunting week-end at Brighton! They came to her flat for their sessions and everything was safely spick-and-span. Mr. Dai alone, by taking her into his house, had braved the world; especially as she had been less than half his age. Poor things indeed! She walked away resolutely from the telephone, and clattered pots and pans about in the kitchen. The silence of the flat closed round the noise.

Val had once laughed at her: "You're anachronistic really." Asked to explain the term, he said: "You're a bygone. There used to be hundreds of you in discreet St. John's Wood villas,

with always a carriage drawn up at the gate. Your life is Edwardian in conception."

"I'm not so long-ago as that," she had protested.

"Oh, I daresay the tradition lingered on, to a certain extent, much later. But that sort of lechery in men is out-of-date. Wives and emancipated girls went on the war-path, dropped their stiff stays, and the true-born Delilahs retired defeated. From what I hear of the twenties your kind of woman was blown out of London finally."

"I wasn't in London so early—was I?"

"I'm talking of your kind, not *you*. By some biological good fortune you've kept your youth. . . . What age are you, darling? I can't place you chronologically."

Ignoring the question, she said: "I have only to walk down this street into the square and I am embarrassed——"

"I don't doubt it, darling. Even that awful farmeress's mackintosh you wear sometimes doesn't prevent luscious affection still oozing from you. Exactly how much money have you made?"

"Why?" She had been unruffled.

"The astute look hardening your face when you read a business letter warns me not to ask for the loan of a hundred pounds."

"What do you want a hundred pounds for?"

"Just to have it in the bank," he had said, dreamily.

"Wouldn't that be blasphemous to your creed?" She was not really knowledgeable about the creed, but understood it flouted security, despised material safety, treated finance as evil.

"My upbringing comes out even in me some-

times, blast it. Daddy's face looks at me. . . . I think I'd like the hundred pounds," he had cogitated, "because it came from your tainted way of life."

"It's not my way of life any more."

At this he had looked at her with a shrewd perception that made him seem twice his age: this often happened, the callow, impudent though agilely talkative youth suddenly obliterated by the image of a mature man.

Stalking about the flat, she kept on remembering these impudences. She went to bed at midnight with a book, locking the door. After about half an hour she heard him come in. Oriana's party had ended early? Sleepless, waiting for him to bang on her door, desolation acquired the threat of a factual catastrophe which can ruin one's life, such as a mortal disease or the loss of one's money.

She hungered for the touch of his young body, for sight of the tautly springing chest with its lustre of a bather rising out of the sea. The entertainments of the flesh became with him a lightly achieved abandon, pranks of athletic glee; which a part of her watched detachedly from afar, like an overseer both wise and dubious. She wanted more than these pleasures, a deeper identification than these transports. When his head lay sleeping under her shoulder the submerged sadness would flow unrestrained. A perishable quality lay in that relaxed body; and in hers. To find here the peace she wanted was impossible.

He did not bang on the door—why did she expect a turbulent bang tonight and not a stealthy knock? Tomorrow acquired finality. At last she got out of

bed and took two of the sleeping tablets which Dr. Kirsten, who lived two doors up the street and flirted with her in a heavy German way, had given her when she went to consult him on the first malady of her life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALTHOUGH LINDA BEHAVED with a not too ostentatious self-restraint, which under the circumstances was admirable, it was Philip who made the meal bearable: he struck with Val one of those unforeseeable contacts which a couple of men of apparently contrasting temperament can often achieve.

"Gosh, a rum chap," he observed, after Val ran up to the bathroom and the sisters were clearing the table. "Not a *bad* chap," he added.

"Take him into the sitting-room," Linda said. "Eva and I want to talk in the kitchen."

"How did you meet him, Eva?" Philip asked bluntly. Linda dropped a fork noisily on a plate.

"He's a friend of Iolo Hancock, the poet and broadcaster," Eva replied.

"And how did you meet *him?* Not your sort of gang, are they?" Eva had insisted on the aid of plentiful drink for what might be a stiff evening and even before they sat down to the meal Philip became boisterous.

"In a pub near my flat where they go. Another of Iolo's friends painted me. It was shown in a gallery. Someone has bought it now."

"Why didn't you buy it?" Linda asked, clattering more cutlery together.

"It wasn't the sort of picture I like."

"Not a nude, was it?" Philip blew.

"Philip, you go too far. . . . Eva, will you carry the gooseberry pie out?" Val had returned, much at home, sweater over his arm: Philip slapped his back and said there was brandy in the sitting-room. "Do you find the house too warm?" Linda asked, looking at the sweater. "Eva, didn't I see you wearing that sweater yesterday?"

"I took it to Val this morning. He finds the town chilly and brought no overcoat."

Linda had told her earlier that she didn't intend telling Philip of Val's 'breaking into the house' the previous night. But apparently the sweater episode was not to be forgiven. Having made the scratch, Linda went into the kitchen laden. Eva followed with the pie and cheeses while the men crossed to the sitting-room.

"I'll get another sweater for Llewellyn," she said, for some reason wanting to placate.

"I saw a nice one in Hopkins's window for three pounds." Linda turned the hot-water tap to full gush. "I'm glad Llewellyn is not to have that one. . . . Good God!" Her shoulders, as she stood at the sink, began to shake.

"What's the matter?"

Linda's face, flushed with laughter not yet allowed to howl its way out, looked over a shoulder for a moment. "Will you fetch the other dishes?" she panted. When Eva had returned with the trayful she squealed: "You terrible . . . *bitch*. . . . His age!" She backed from the sink and collapsed on a low kitchen stool, her flowered evening dress billowing out under the apron she had whisked on. And she laughed loud and long. "Ah . . . ah . . . oh!" she heaved, rocking, arms clasped round her

middle in pain. "Gooo . . ." she groaned, several tears running out, "ahhh. . . ."

"You never could take drink." Eva crossed resolutely to the rubbish pail. "Do you want to keep the remains of this beef?"

"Don't throw it away!" Linda leapt up. "I can fricassee it tomorrow." But she had not yet done; back at the sink with the dishes and flowing water, she tittered, giggled, choked. "Oh, Eva!" she broke off, gasping. "How could you? The funniest thing for ages!" Suddenly whipping round from the sink, a hiss curled round her voice. "But for God's sake don't let it be known here in Bylau. My life wouldn't be worth living—or Philip's at the laboratories. . . . A laughing-stock! Thank God Llewellyn isn't here. What would he think? . . . Good God!" And off she went again, bent helplessly over the sink, laughing into the suds.

Eva began to dry the dishes. She looked unimpressed by her sister's bout, carefully laying down the Crown Derby plates which had belonged to Mr. Dai, and which poor Linda, imagining the unknown guest to be one of Eva's friends of consequence (in spite of the previous night's incident), had mistakenly brought forth, together with her best evening frock. Linda glanced round at her from the steam of the sink, and immediately broke into more laughter.

"Would a cup of tea tone you down?" Eva enquired.

"We're taking them coffee in a few minutes," Linda gasped, more controlled. "Grind the berries, will you? Oh, dear me! Does your little man want milk with it?"

"Val is twenty-four," Eva said flatly, crossing to the coffee mill screwed into the wall.

"No! . . . Well, I am surprised. . . . And those clothes! Like an unemployed plasterer's boy throwing stones on the river bank——"

"In London and Paris," Eva said, still patient, "his sort dress like that, both the girls and the fellows. He's by no means half-baked. . . . Shut up!" She flung a handful of berries so roughly into the mill that many scattered to the floor.

Linda, now triumphant (it seemed) over the hysteria, dried her hands and looked at her sister with careful commiseration. "Don't tread on the berries, dear," she said; "sweep them up. You're not in bohemian places now."

At one turn of the wheel she had reassumed command of this house, command which Eva, if only by virtue of owning the title deeds and most of the contents, had subtly wrested since she arrived. Eva's usual assured air of worldliness, her clothes, even her unjust retention of much of youth's bloom, of course gave her extra authority. But Nemesis was at hand now. When Val had walked into the house at eight o'clock, half an hour late, Linda positively staggered back a step in astonishment. Since Eva had returned from her morning outing to the town, she had said nothing of this friend's history, character or age, not even when Linda had gone so far as to ask: "Did you settle anything with your burglar of last night?" . . . She watched her sweep up the berries. Extraordinary Eva had temporarily gone off her head, of course, poor thing. Linda longed to confer with Philip—still omitting the breaking-in of last night: *that*, in loyalty to her

sister, she judged not suitable for even a husband's ears.

"Look, dear," she said, whipping off the apron as Eva scooped ground coffee into the pot, "is this fellow blackmailing you in some way? I could get Philip to put a boot to him."

Eva took a cigarette from the packet on the dresser and lit it at the gas cooker, her hand trembling.

"I love him," she said, "and in the circumstances a certain kind of blackmail is not surprising. As for Philip's boot, in turn I'd boot both him and you out of this house."

"Good gracious! You're losing control of yourself, Eva. . . . Not so much water in that pot, the coffee will be weak." Linda looked up. The cigarette hung on Eva's lower lip; the features of her face seemed to be rearranged; in place of the usual genial judiciousness there was a disreputable lack of order—yes, Linda decided, a *nastiness*, which made her look ten years older. "Well, there's no need to be nasty," she said, with some belligerence. "I'm going by my eyes." She fetched spoons. "We'll use the coffee cups in the sitting-room cabinet, not those," she conceded however—"Twenty-four! But if only he had been a young gentleman! From Harrow or Oxford or somewhere. Those trousers, Eva! They're what bricklayers wear, in Bylau."

"Well, he's not a bricklayer. Linda, never try to reduce anyone from what they *are*; it's mean and shows a paltry mind." She made another sad attempt to rally herself. "Look a person straight in the eye, strip him of his clothes, listen to the

tone of his voice and not the words. Val's got a clear eye, a good body, and no humbug in his voice. . . . Are you carrying the tray in or shall I?"

"I don't think I've got the strength. I feel more like going upstairs to pray."

"For more understanding?"

"I think, dear, you just want someone to domineer over."

"I domineer Val! Ha!" She picked up the tray and began to walk out. "Val's got something worthwhile in him. He hasn't given in, he's free."

Following behind, Linda replied in the hall: "If he's such a clean little angel, what are you struggling against? Anybody can see you are not enjoying yourself."

Eva paused, then said patiently: "I'm too old. He has come too late." She might have been addressing herself. "I was sleeping. He wakened me. But too late. Too late, perhaps, for everything."

Linda straightened a rug with her foot. "You're working out a repentance, I expect," she remarked, as though it was the sort of thing often discussed at a Guild meeting.

"Repentance for what?"

"Now, Eva! . . . For choosing Mr. Dai instead of that boy Elwyn Hughes, of course. I put two and two together while this fellow was eating beef as if he wouldn't get another meal for a week—*he* hasn't got T.B., has he?" And she reminded her sister: "Crying over Elwyn's photo last night in your room!"

"Crying?—no. I don't know about the repentance. One can see too much in any behaviour."

This guilty undercurrent of pleading! Why was she submitting to these stuffy opinions of her conduct? (What had Val said in the cemetery?—"Never question the validity of any human relationship." *He* had the elegance of true liberation!) She told herself she didn't care a hoot for these attitudes of Linda and her kind. It was not for those reasons that she had this urgency to get rid of Val. The sole reason was self-preservation. This fury for him could not be borne. It was only that. She stared across the hall table at Linda and the anger died out of her face.

Linda placed her hands round the coffee-pot. "It's still hot enough. Let's go in." She smiled approvingly at the pot, one of her independent purchases.

In the sitting-room, Philip, still exuberant, shouted: "Guess what! This bloody little Don Juan has got off with Vera Edwards of the Coity Inn. He saw her this morning buying chops in the town . . . and there she was serving in the bar of his hotel!" This Val was a hell of a fellow; his association with Eva, whatever it was, could not be treated as of any great account. "That's why he was late coming here, see?"

"I didn't know she was the daughter of the house," Val said, avoiding Eva's eye.

"Did they give you a nice room in the Coity?" Linda asked, pouring coffee.

"I haven't examined it; it's a room. . . . 'You're not a Commercial, are you?' this Miss Edwards asked me in the bar. She reminded me of that barmaid in Manet's painting; sad, pure face, pensive——"

"Ha, ha!" roared Philip, pouring more brandy, "Vera's a pure case, all right! She's got the pure well in hand. Her old man's got cash, too: Noah P. Edwards—you remember the family, Eva? Made their money in coal shares. Mr. Dai died in the arms of Noah's lawyer uncle after touching top C on the top of Cader Idris mountain, blowing up his lungs to the glory of God——"

"So they say." Linda's depreciatory glance moved from Philip to Mr. Dai's portrait over the mantelpiece. She spoke as if these matters were remote to the point of myth. "He was silly to climb to the top of Cader Idris at his age."

"How old can Noah P.'s daughter be?" Eva asked absently.

"A good twenty-six, I believe," Linda replied. "Looks younger; one thinks of her as a girl. She used to go about with a man called Hugh Nelson, employed at one of the new factories. It all fizzled out. She made an ass of herself over him. Vera's all right, but intense. Hugh Nelson was one of those cold men that don't really care for us women. He was last seen in Bylau railway station with a trunk and a corgi on a bright blue lead."

"She certainly stood wiping glasses with an air of knowledge," Val said, still avoiding looking at Eva.

"Didn't Noah P. divorce his wife years ago?" Eva continued, as if conversation had to be kept going. "How does Vera get on with her father?"

"They quarrel. He still buys up property. A good sort, as perhaps you remember. He never married again. That wife of his—Bronwen, remember?—landed up in America, they say. She was a one, too."

Philip said: "Cute how Noah P. bought up the Bwlch land—to say nothing of the Coity Inn. He could smell the factories coming, after coal began to be a back number in Bylau."

"Who is that?" Val asked, looking up at Mr. Dai's portrait. That he did not display a bored or alien air of being outside these local interests—indeed, he seemed to respond to the provincial milieu like an exile returning to it—could have been agreeable except for an element brought into the room by the women: Linda kept on smiling to herself and Eva remained absently inscrutable.

"It's the General Manager of the Bylau Coal Company," Linda replied, in a completing tone. "Now dead."

"I showed you his memorial stone in the cemetery this morning," Eva added, allowing herself a full glance at Val. Linda bowed her head.

Val blinked, his nose quivering—with malice? "Looks a traditional coal-boss. Bombastic?"

Linda asked Philip: "Reach me that box of turkish delight, will you?"

"I never found him bombastic in the eleven years I lived with him."

"I don't consider it a good painting," Linda said, winningly despotic. "You seem to be interested in painting, Mr. . . . Mr. . . ." She offered him the box of sweetmeat, her smile as gelatinous. "Do you paint? It was one of my subjects when I was a school-teacher."

"The Workmen's Recreational Institute, named after Mr. Dai, is near your hotel," Eva continued relentlessly. "I laid one of the foundation stones; there are eight of them. I was chosen, I think, as a

representative of the Bylau daughters. My father, an ordinary miner, was killed in a pit accident. Linda, who studied hard to better herself and become a school-teacher, should have been chosen. I'm not really a credit to Bylau. The night after I laid the stone an abusive word was chalked above my name."

Linda, her smile congealing, decided to take to her work-basket and asked Philip to fetch it from under the cabinet. Philip, with that good-fellow haleness often retained by wartime officers from the days of their sole glorious freedom in life, stood glassy for a few moments. He wanted to suggest that Val run down with him in the car to the Coity Inn bar, but dared not yet: he was at sea in all this. He sat down and gripped the brandy bottle like a rifle. "Noah P., now," he addressed Val—"he's President of the Bylau Football Club and a member of my Lodge. When I run you back tonight I'll introduce you to the old bird if he's in his back parlour. . . . Eva, he's asked more than once about you, now I come to think of it. I remember him saying after a dinner, 'Now, there was a lovely gal, Eva Pritchard!' They don't fetch them up like that in Bylau now."

"Today," Linda agreed, threading black wool, "Eva would be chosen as Beauty Queen on carnival day and ride about Bylau grinning in a motor-car with streamers and bands blaring. In those old days people were more natural about a beautiful girl, same as in poetry, and the girl herself was just lovely and didn't grin about it like an advertisement for undies. . . . As for men, they jumped up in the tramcars to offer seats to girls quick as if

they'd been stung by a bee. The days that are no more!" She turned direct to Val: "All this about Bylau must seem antique history to you, young man." Eva gave an indulgent laugh. Linda was overdoing it wonderfully.

Philip said obsessively: "Noah P. must be worth fifty thousand at least. If Bylau is granted borough status he'll be Mayor, mark my words."

"His daughter would have to be Mayoress," Linda said reflectively. "I wonder why he never married again?"

"I don't," Philip blew.

"Bronwen was a tartar," Linda recalled. "Perhaps it's not surprising that daughter of theirs went wild over the wrong sort of young man."

Val said: "A London friend of mine would be mad to paint her. . . . Eric," he addressed Eva. "Just his subject, don't you agree?"

"I don't think I've met or seen this girl," Eva replied sedately.

She could well imagine him in the bar of the Coity and the curiosity he would evoke as an unplaceable visitor. Not since the grim days of the thirties, when Bylau became one of the notorious 'distressed areas' and young crusaders of highbrow communist tinge scoured such places (with, according to vocation, wads of manuscript, statistical minds, oratorical tongues, painting easels), had such a type as Val penetrated this industrial fastness. Besides, he had that well-graced way of striking up acquaintance with anybody, in any place, an engaging waif. A root of ivy looking for a wall. And there was always a wall ready for young ivy. She sat alert.

Philip was off again—something about the father packing this Vera off to a relation in North Wales and her returning by the next train, going up to lodgings in Bylau and vengefully taking a job as a nursemaid under her wealthy father's eyes. How the subject of this girl persisted!

"She took a part once in a play our Guild put on," Linda said. "Only because that fellow was in it. She was as bad as could be and threw everybody off their lines, clumsy as an elephant. . . . No, you wouldn't know her, Eva. She came after your time here. But you would remember her father, of course."

Philip thumped his rugger chest. "Phil wants a breather!" he shouted, bustling, baleful. "Coming?" he demanded of Val.

"Why, Philip!" tittered Linda, in approving reproof.

"The Coity bar closes at half-past ten! Come on, sweetie," he beamed at Val, "let's go and beat Vera up."

They went. Val himself seemed glad to go. Nothing was said to him of another meeting, not even a 'I'll phone you' from Eva. She sat sipping brandy, her first, when Linda returned from the hall saying: "Sorry, dear. I expect Philip thought I'd had enough of it."

"Of Val, you mean?"

"Well, he's rather a problem, isn't he?" Linda emptied the ash-trays into the fire.

"For you to entertain?"

"Who could take a boy like that seriously?" Kneeling at the hearth, her brushing up of the fallen cinders also brushed away the problem.

though not without what sounded like her final pronouncement on the whole matter: "I suppose this is what comes of making love a full-time . . . thing." She evaded the word 'job' nicely. "Love is not enough," she said, more earnestly. "It starves one. That's why you've had to ginger-up your life with this madness."

"At the table, putting two and two together, you decided it was because I chose Mr. Dai instead of Elwyn."

"Whatever it is, it's mad," Linda said vigorously. "You hinted in the kitchen I had a paltry mind. Heaven above, if this business isn't paltry I'm the Queen of Sheba." Kneeling, she gave the fading coals a violent poke. "Where's your dignity gone, woman?"

Eva started. That word 'dignity'! She did not reply. Explosiveness retreated from her. She sipped the brandy, silent for long moments. It occurred to her that she had been guilty of an act of unforgivable vulgarity in allowing Val to come to the house. Philip's boisterous crudities, Linda's kitchen hilarity, were allowable in comparison.

Linda herself, perhaps in instinctive celebration, took a small quantity of brandy, relaxing in the squashed armchair blood-warmed by staunch Philip. Eva looked at her in distant speculation. Forgiving the kitchen ridicule—no doubt it had an amount of cruel health—she said, slowly: "Val did seem out of place here. But Philip liked him; you didn't." She sat musing. "Who was it said there are two kinds of men—those born to protect us and those born to understand us."

"Both kinds are unfaithful by nature, as I expect

you know. . . . Yes, Philip liked him. But I don't think your young man is likely to lead him astray. Philip is just a dreamer. There's his position in the laboratories, the banquets, and everything—oh, he'd keep straight. I'm not bothered about him. It's you, dear. What *are* you going to do about this boy?"

"It's silly to ask that. You can't settle a human being by just doing something—except, of course, by murder." She rambled: "Fate takes a hand——"

"Fate needs something to go on. I tell you what: *disappear*."

Useless to expect any aid here! Rising from her chair, with an air of closing the subject, Eva said sombrely: "It's impossible to disappear from oneself." At the door, she paused, and, looking at the clock, returned resignedly to her chair.

"Is he a scamp?" Linda resumed, gratified by this return to the room.

"What is a scamp? There are only people who give us happiness or do not."

Linda said: "I believe you invited him here tonight because you wanted to shock yourself into realisation of how low you've sunk." Eva stared at her. "You're clinging to me, Eva!" And Linda held out her hands, without stretching her arms. "You're clinging to *us*," she amended. "Philip and me and Llewellyn."

Eva reached for the *Radio Times*. "Can we have the wireless on?" she asked.

Linda got up with benevolence. "Of course, dear. Whatever you like."

"Some music," Eva said in a parched voice, like Elizabeth asking for the viols to be brought. And

the subject remained in abeyance, though not for very long.

Philip returned just after midnight. He bumbled into the room exclaiming: "What, not gone to bed, you two?"

"I suppose you found Noah P. sitting in his parlour?" Linda began examination. "Men drinking after licensed hours! Gossiping women can't be compared. . . . Don't tickle my neck," she shrieked, not without pleasure, "it's like a spider. You'd better lock up. And lock up properly tonight. Last night you left the kitchen window unfastened."

"Noah P.'s got himself a car at last. A Daimler! He always hired one before. It's for Vera really; a birthday present, he told me."

"Well, I hope it will keep her quiet. Did she sit with you in the back parlour?"

"For a while. She asked this Val boy if he wanted some cold supper and he said yes."

Linda cried out: "What! After all the beef he ate here!" She looked at Eva. "Is he always so famished, Eva? So slender, too!"

"Eva!" Philip asked as she lit a cigarette, "have you adopted him? Is he an orphan or something?"

"Don't talk such rubbish," Linda said sweepingly. "Eva is in love with him."

"Ha!" Philip gurgled, a stranger to such passions. But he stared at Eva with a round, minotaur eye. "He's got something, that chap. Wouldn't mind getting him a job in the laboratories, if he'd fit in. Too many young men bunk off from Bylau." Like his wife earlier, he made a brushing-away gesture.

"Where did Vera give him his supper?" Linda enquired; perhaps for silent Eva.

Philip suddenly displayed anger. "How the hell do I know? Dining-room, I suppose. Pickles with it, I expect. Questions!"

"Well, the family don't eat in the hotel dining-room, do they?" Linda pursued. "Under all those potted palms."

"Pah!" Philip blew, aggrieved. "*I* sat in the parlour with old Noah P. talking about cars, and that's an end to it, see?"

"The best room in the Coity," Linda said, unaffected, "is the first-floor one where wedding receptions are held." She turned to Eva. "Polly Vaughan, that I gave your Crown Derby teapot to, had hers there. Vera herself was a guest, and attractive she looked, too, off duty. I remember she hotly criticised the meal provided—'It's not my fault,' she said, 'Daddy trusts that b—— of a manager, who ought to be in jail.' Her language is not always a lady's. Funnily enough the creature *was* in jail a few months later. Cooking the accounts and a thief—two whole Caerphilly cheeses disappeared into thin air in the kitchen. Now they've got a respectable married man in his place."

"I'll lock up," Philip said, morose.

"And don't forget the kitchen window." The door slammed. She said to Eva, who was rising to go: "The jealous old thing—just because they've bought a Daimler! . . . Are you going too? See you in the morning, then. Bye-bye."

To flee the house at once! The fantastic impulse obsessed her. If there was a train tonight! Pictures of hidden Cornish hamlets, anonymous Midland

cities, façades of bleak Scottish hostelries, chased through her mind. Hearing Philip coming into the hall from the kitchen she made an effort and scrambled up the remaining stairs. She locked her door. Bed and a book! But no sleeping tablets tonight. Let the cursed thing have its way.

She lay settled in a humbug of composure, a novel tilted into the rose light. It was useless. She got out of the smothering bed. Another person, old and helpless, made the movement; she seemed to watch, with pitying criticism, an absurd creature emerging from a stifling cocoon and sitting on the edge of the bed in woebegone confusion, even the soft light too much for it.

The spasm passed. Not since the train journey down had such a bout gripped her. The two identities fused again, she sat at the dressing-table, slowly moving articles, looking in drawers, idly taking time over the search for the sleeping tablets. She noticed with an acute but detached sense of pleasure the sinuous flow of wood graining, vivid shivering of crystal, loud blaze of silver, the secretion of mineral sorcery in a ruby octagon: sniffing a bottle of scent, she remembered with additional pleasure the crispness of the untaxed five-pound note handed over, not without a luxurious qualm, in the shop.

All the time she listened. A fastened kitchen window would not defeat him. Yet she knew he would not come tonight, and this was acceptable and releasing. But she listened. All that mattered was his presence. He came alive in the night, enjoyed its dark floutings. The hard problems of the day lost importance in the night and he entered

into his dominion as her true and tenacious lover. Her hand loosened its grip on the smooth-skinned bottle of scent. In growing anger she asked herself yet again what was this extraordinary malady cursing her? Linda's kitchen laughter crashed about her. For the first time in her life the conception of suicide was shorn of its far-fetched melodrama, degradation, insanity, and the terrible isolation of the human soul that it revealed stood forth as truth. But she knew this thought of suicide belonged only to tonight and that in the everyday clarity of tomorrow it would seem absurd too.

This ferocious torment must be borne *now* And without the aid of tablets! She got up, fetched the necessaries from the chest drawer, and began to darn a stocking. That damned innkeeper's daughter could be the solution. Had she and Val reached some sort of understanding at that very moment, sitting together in the gruesome dining-room under those potted palms? She saw him at his pranks under the fronds, cruets and sauce bottles still on the tables, the rusty black leather wall-settees suitable for his riff-raff kind, a commercial hotel faun. The darning needle ran into her flesh and she spat out a cry of pain. But the little accident pulled her up. The pad of her forefinger pressed against her lips, she sat recalled.

CHAPTER EIGHT

EVEN THE TERRORS of the populace burning, choking in boiling lava, under crashing columns, stampeding horses and a cinderously obliterated sky, a whole city in its death throes, failed to comfort her. She had gone to see a revival of a favourite old film, *The Last Days of Pompeii,* and as usual taken a bag of marshmallows with her. On one side of her a youngish nuisance would not allow his nudging knee to be rejected, on the other a jaw-grinding young woman of pink and thick-skinned Austrian appearance kept taking eatables—biscuits, a wedge of cake, an apple—out of a brown-paper carrier, finishing up with coffee from a thermos flask. It was a cheap little cinema in a bed-sitting-room district: of her two trying neighbours she minded the dining girl least. She left, giving the young man a beady scowl as she pushed past him.

She hastened, almost ran, into the street. It was near the time when, oftener than not, Val telephoned. A cab drew up at last; in fifteen minutes it reached the house which, as always at night, wore the non-committal look of a building deserted of occupants.

The hall smelt of shrouded typewriters, full waste-paper baskets and closed account books; the dusty table looked unowned in spite of the two

empty milk bottles on it. Transon & Smith's hall-floor door seemed closed for ever; behind that of the first-floor Holiday Travel Agency all frivolity connected with the business lay stilled. Only Mrs. Gosbee in the attics breathed life, and she would be sleeping blissfully immune from pail, scrubbing-brush and these stone uncarpeted stairs. As was their way, the time-switch lights went out before allowing any but gay leaping feet to accomplish the three flights. She sighed. Her haste outside (all for a telephone call which might not come, and, if it did come, would be inconclusive) had slunk down into her feet.

On the third flight, halting in the sallow residue of outside light coming from the window below, she sensed a presence before seeing the smudgy figure sitting on the top step. She waited some moments to allow her heart to steady.

"What are you doing there?" she called up, and thought the question remarkably foolish.

"Hiding from the police. Also from drink, and debts, and arguments, from boredom, unsatisfactory people, and telephone booths. Enough?"

After slowly mounting a dozen more steps, she leaned against the wall below the sitting figure. "How did you get in?" she asked reasonably. Mrs. Gosbee had been forbidden to admit him.

"On the day you turned me out I took offence at your demanding the return of the spare keys you had given me when I lived here. So when there was an opportunity I helped myself to the street door key which you hid in the kitchen dresser drawer; I didn't get a chance to steal the one for your flat door—you put it in your handbag."

"I see."

"I've waited a fortnight. . . . Only telephone conversations!—not much satisfaction for a lover accustomed to his rights."

"It's best for us not to meet." Their voices sounded oddly cautious and sober; there was even a tranquillity in the air. The dim staircase seemed to demand a reserve.

"We won't go into all that again," he remarked, without impatience.

"What do you want of me?" Again she thought how foolish was the question. She could sense the smile on the secret face lost in dimness as he leaned back on his hands. She still stood, as though exhausted, against the wall.

"I'm not really thinking of my own immediate need," he replied, after a pause. "What do I want? I think I want to destroy in you the last trace of modesty and so-called respectability—those things that make your old men like and trust you. What I want is that you frighten the life out of them—blackmail and harass them, threaten them. You don't need money. Put the fear of God particularly in the terrible devils who ought to be faithful to their long-suffering wives."

She said, patiently: "I haven't been seeing any of them. If that is what's worrying you."

"Because of me?"

"I don't know." She straightened herself and fumbled for a cigarette in her handbag. "Perhaps because most people get, or need, a change of habits sooner or later." Deciding not to smoke the cigarette, she rambled on: "I had begun to be self-satisfied about my life. . . . I've been trying to

decide to live with my sister in Wales." Why did she say that? She had no intention of settling with Linda.

"Can I have a cigarette? I'm cleaned out . . . I walked here from Hampstead," he added, with some emphasis.

"Sprees in the Nightshade?" She tossed him a cigarette. The flame of a match hollowed his face greenishly and he seemed a stranger and renewed to her. "You're extravagant, Val," she said, adding with some determination: "And expensive."

"I believe in snatching a few pleasures under the grisly nose of this Thou Shalt Not England." The Goat in Boots bleat! "All the attributes of my body cry out for recognition of their rights. I intend to listen to them as far as I am able."

"Well, as long as you do it with a . . . belief, I suppose it's all right—less harmful, at least, watching yourself doing it. . . . This means you want some money? I have two or three pounds in my bag."

"I want to come in; that is what I want."

She shook her head, forgetting she was in darkness, and did not reply. Becoming aware of the drag in her limbs, she sat down two steps below him. Her head against the wall, she said: "How silent this house is at nights! It's no longer meant for living in, it's become only a commercial building."

"Especially since I was thrown out of it."

She laughed quietly. "How is Iolo?"

"Still gleefully murdering his lights and liver. He often asks me to give you his love. . . . Oh, by the way, he gave me some money to hand to you,

two or three pounds—I forget; repayment of a loan. I spent the money. . . . I remember he said: 'Tell Eva she owes me a night and I'll be calling in a cab one midnight dressed just in a garland of vine leaves.' "

"Why should he think I owe him a night?" she asked idly, still strangely at peace, quietly talking on the dark anonymous stairs.

"I don't know. Does he think one of his friends brought you happiness? Or does he believe *all* women owe him a night?"

"He certainly was very good on the wireless the other evening," she said amiably, "reading the poem about the sea." She laughed again. "Remember—he was writing it at the time you and I first met? . . . That room of his, and the cockles and shrimps and eels to give him inspiration, and the National Health man calling in the morning—oh, but you weren't there then, you——" She paused; these were treacherous remembrances. "Give Iolo my love when you arrive at the Nightshade," she said, detachedly—"it's open until the early hours, isn't it? Tell him I've given up every kind of night."

"Iolo's not at the Nightshade tonight. He left for Paris yesterday, Ann under his arm like a redeemed mermaid."

She jerked into interest. "They're together again?" A ghostly chiming came from a great distance.

"No one is ever together with Iolo except his pure muse. Was that eleven o'clock striking?"

"Yes."

Neither spoke for a long time. The silence had a

web-like fragility which seemed to caution her as well as Val. Her gaze averted from where he sat, she thought how the young have little to give out; they absorb and are forever famished. Slowly turning her head, she saw his partially suggested face in the cigarette glow, and a prayer sighed in her: for deliverance from the delusion of the eye. The silence continued.

He pressed the cigarette-stump out on the step. "You are very quiet. Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"Invite? That's funny!" She had been totally unable to denounce the theft of the street door key. "Why didn't you get a replica made of the flat door key when you had the use of one?"

"Until the last moment I never thought you really meant to throw me out."

"Is Queenie looking after you properly?"

"Properly?" The sense of his smile impinged on her. "Is that the word?"

"What do you mean?" She hoped the bridling hadn't reached her voice.

"Hampstead is unsettling, Eva. That great rugged heath brings out the ancestral in me. The eye searches for a cave, the hand feels for a club. I was born on Bodmin Moor, remember, and lived there until I was fourteen. My bandy-legged father was one of its aborigines. You should not have dumped me on Hampstead Heath. When I take that black poodle of Queenie's for a walk——"

"I can't see you exercising Queenie's poodle," she scoffed, dwelling on the vision, however.

"She lets me borrow the hand-made gramophone and classical records a soldier stored with her before

disappearing to the war. She bakes curious little cakes like a woman amusing herself at being a housewife. Thank you, by the way, for paying a month's rent of my room."

"Queenie told me on the phone that she had brought you and Horatio Harl together."

"He has given me a commission for designs. It was nice of Queenie."

"Of me, really. Queenie does nothing free of charge. I've introduced her to my Mr. Stevens of Queen's Gate."

"That old satyr! I've heard about him from Queenie. How *can* they, at their age! What a terrible life you've led, Eva!"

"I only sat reading quite boring books to him," she said, in an extraordinary defensive way. "Such dry books. What is a satyr?"

He did not answer. They might have been settling there for a further hour as she offered him another cigarette, and she took advantage of the movement to change her numbing position on the hard step. There was a silence. She remembered the howling depression of that first evening when he had left the flat for Queenie's. The telephone had not rung that night; even Queenie had not seen fit to be aware of her friend's hell and give information that the demon lover had arrived safely and gone to bed. . . . He went on calmly smoking the cigarette. If she leaned forward she could snatch it out of his mouth. A need to slap his face preoccupied her briefly.

"What are you thinking?" she asked at last.

"I'm trying to remember the time of the last Tube train to Hampstead."

"You can take a cab, of course." She got up. "Do you want something to eat first?"

"I'm starving," he said mildly.

In bed, as they became aware of the surprising light of dawn shifting the curtains, he said: "Let me come back." Leaning on an elbow, his smile as he looked down on her, in that miracle shimmer of light, threatened pleasure to be renewed in due course. His face came nearer. "Let me come back," he whispered, honeyed.

"Oh no." She lay listening to her own casual murmur. "It's not to be."

"Oh yes. I love it here. Learn to say yes, be gloriously weak and say yes to me. . . ." His tongue urged liquidly into her ear. "Say yes."

She put her palms against the cool chest and thrust him away. Her palms sweated. "Don't argue this now, Val," she said.

"You're not getting up?"

"I've got to think," she said.

He permitted her exit from the bed. "About letting me come back?"

"I suppose so."

"I would prefer you dwelt on it here in my arms. Out there your silly furniture will get hold of you, your gas-cooker hiss, your teapot turn its back on you. Be wicked and come back to all that matters——" He yawned, however.

As she slipped into the blue wrap she, too, yawned, rather obviously. "Get up in a minute or two, Val. I want you to leave early; I really want to be alone, to think about it all. . . . Look, I promise to decide about your coming back by lunch-time. You can ring me at twelve . . . no,

eleven; I might have to go out at eleven-thirty."

"Sounds very harassed already, darling." He yawned again.

She looked carefully in the mirror and powdered her face. "I wish to God I had never met you," she said. "But now that I have . . ." She shrugged, crossing the room. "I'll make coffee. Will you eat an egg? You ate all the bacon last night."

"Domesticity at this hour!" The golden flush of window light promised a fair day. "We could fly to Paris!" he said suddenly. "Iolo is there. Is your passport up to date?"

"No!" She disappeared to the kitchen.

"It's not withdrawn?" he bawled. "How wonderful!"

In a few minutes he appeared dressed in a frail transparent mac of indeterminate tint which she used when showers threatened. A certain swagger was manifest as, with a young man's modesty, he tied the belt tightly round his slender waist. "Give me this? Can a man wear it? The colour is queer. . . . Like a fuchsia in the rain." He began to whistle an impromptu tune.

"Your egg is boiling." She cut bread. The odour of coffee rose cheerfully. "Mrs. Gosbee will be coming down for the offices and stairs in less than an hour."

"So what?" He sang: "I love Mrs. Gosbee and, oh, Mrs. Gosbee'd like to love me."

"Your egg is ready."

"Only one?"

"I've got to be at my hairdresser's at twelve," she said absently. "So be sure to ring before then."

He glanced at her. "Sharp at eleven, probably

before. Why are you so considerate of Mrs. Gosbee's opinion?"

"I'm not equal to coping with her surprise this morning. I don't want to talk to anyone until I've thought. When you've left I'm going back to bed." She added: "I'm trying to decide to give up this flat and buy a small house."

"Let me choose the colour schemes, darling."

In the bathroom, giving himself a swill, he broke into a simple chortle of music, bawling:

> ". . . fuchsias in the rain,
> lovely fuchsias in the rain,
> colours of chil-blains,
> queer little Nelly . . .
> she put the fuchsias on the telly,
> her mum said, Nelly,
> fuchsias are so smelly
> wetted with the rain . . ."

She went towards the bathroom to hiss at him, and retreated. The well-flexed voice filled every cranny of the place with a raucous sweetness.

Dressed in those much-worn jeans and the shabby leather jacket which he would not discard, he came into the sitting-room, where she was turning out her handbag. Finding only a ten-shilling note and some silver, she remembered a bill paid in cash yesterday and explained this. "Five shillings is enough," he said cheerfully. "I'll get to Hampstead on the Tube, and I'm staying there all day; got those designs to finish for Harl. Will he pay on the nail, I wonder?"

"Don't borrow from Queenie. It won't do."

"No, it won't," he sang. "Queenie's not human. Queenie's what came of the union one midsummer night of two wax models left alone in a store basement; Queenie's queenly but not queenry queenie. . . ." He put a finger under her chin and tilted her face up. "Brooding already? Now, now!" Absolute power smiled, not without some tribute to her, in his washed face which, even in that short time, had acquired the resilience of the sun rapidly wakening the houses of the street outside.

"No," she said, looking aside; "I'm not properly made up; go away."

It was then he spread a hand low around her throat and gave a sharp squeeze, the thumb and index finger pressing like the smash of fingers into a peach, the grip tenaciously sure. He continued to smile. She did not lose her temper, only pulled his hand from this prank, gurgling.

"My beautiful!" he whispered.

"Now go." She stroked her throat. Her flesh bruised easily.

"Sharp at eleven!" His step was dexterously light, as usual. "Come to a cinema tonight?"

"We'll see——" She leant over the banister as, with that leap of success and appeased vanity in his feet, he went down the stairs. The street door closed with considerate quietness. He was gone.

The next four hours did not allow time for any doubt. She sat down only to run through the drawers of the little writing desk. At ten o'clock, while she was ringing for a cab, Mrs. Gosbee came in and received instructions that on no account was the telephone to be answered. A large suitcase lay

open on the floor. Within ten minutes she was at the bank drawing a hundred pounds.

"A holiday?" asked Roy, a friend who always looked sensitively distracted at being in charge of so much public money, though he flicked notes with eyes closed as though against the sins of the world.

"No, an operation."

"Not a drastic one, dear?"

"It remains to be seen. Shut your trap and count that money; I'm in a hurry."

"You don't *look* a hospital case, Mrs. Pritchard."

"How many times have I told you I'm not married?"

"We do the best we can for our customers," he stated, and as she left the counter, stuffing the wads in her handbag, gave her a confederate's weary smile from above his big array of morning money.

Mrs. Gosbee said: "You are back soon, my dearie. The phone hasn't gone. Perhaps it's out of order."

"Perhaps not," she snapped, flushed of cheek.

"People who don't want to receive calls lay the receiver off," Mrs. Gosbee observed, majestic with information.

"Adelaide," her employer said, "don't badger me."

"Sure you are not badgering yourself?"

"Now, listen carefully." She gave instructions which apparently indicated the flat would be closed for a long period. And *no* information was to be given to any enquirer except that Miss Pritchard was travelling: in particular, Val was not to be allowed a foot inside the street door.

"That little trollop," Mrs. Gosbee said, firmer of

tone than of gender, "I'll tan his behind if he tries any tricks on me."

The telephone rang. It was a quarter to eleven. She ran into the bedroom and made final preparations for the exile. The ringing continued for an insanely long time; when it stopped the silence still held a threatening echo of it. Mrs. Gosbee appeared and asked: "Shall I get that leaky tap seen to while you're away? . . . My God, you do look sorry for yourself. Take it easy, my girl. After all, we haven't got bombs falling on London now."

"Phone the rank for a cab, will you? To be here at eleven." After she had telephoned, Mrs. Gosbee asked about the butter and fats in the fridge, and waddled back to the kitchen with more rapidity than was her wont. The shoe-horn couldn't be found. The fuchsia raincoat was hurled across the room. The telephone rang again at exactly eleven o'clock. The street door-bell rang simultaneously.

"Your taxi," Mrs. Gosbee said.

"Take the suitcase down."

She followed precipitately at the woman's heels, and pushed past her impatiently. The ringing could be heard on the flights of stairs. "Paddington," she told the cab driver. It sounded like a snarl, and her glowering frown was of that atavistic kind which an equable face alien to it can display with alarming suddenness. A bout of sickening pain came to her in the cab.

There was nearly an hour to endure in the station. She hid in the Ladies' Waiting Room of Number One platform and, weighted down with the suitcase, lurched out only when the guard's whistle blew for the train drawn up outside.

CHAPTER NINE

"THE NIGHT YOU BROKE IN at my sister's home you called me a dirty trickster, and I suppose I *was* one. But at that time I couldn't do anything else but run away: self-preservation, anger at my weakness with you, anything and anywhere *not* to see your face . . . the silly hysteria of being in love——" It was the first time she had stated that phrase to him.

They sat talking among the palms of the lounge, a turkey-carpeted space much glorified since Noah P. Edwards had transformed the Coity Inn from a roistering pub of Mr. Dai's day into a residential hotel patronised by commercial travellers and visitors with business to do at the modern factories outside the town. This evening no one else saw fit to sit in the lounge. Eva sipped the driest sherry stocked in another space captioned (much to the mirth of the old Coity Inn habitues) *American Cocktail Bar.*

"In love? Oh, come, Eva, don't use that expression. It makes me think of a big boil on the neck. It's unhealthy, darling." He brushed ash off the sleeve of the new olive-green tweed coat. (Was it Vera who had achieved the feat of making him discard that disreputable leather lumberjacket?) "Two people admit a necessity for each other, and a physical act, if successful and mutually

agreeable, acknowledges the necessity further: that's all."

She sighed, as always when he talked like that. And it was strange that he never seemed ridiculously priggish when uttering such statements: perhaps his look of a highly accomplished urchin made them tolerable. "Is that all?" she asked, but ready to dismiss the subject. This bridge couldn't be crossed in talk.

"For me, yes. I'm not surprised you say 'silly hysteria'. You're basically honest and sound. *Romeo and Juliet* is one long disease, with death its natural consequence."

"You'll find that Vera will want other acknowledgements than the one mentioned."

"Probably. But the other acknowledgements have to do with the old warfare of the sexes: who's boss and so on. Not with love or copulation—if you separate the two." He was smoking a cigar.

She took a sip of sherry, smiled, and said: "Love is certainly a curse. But don't belittle it." Instinct had preserved him from that love? He could not fall in love with a woman of her age? "What interests you in Vera?" she asked, in a marginal way.

"She interests me as a character. The circumstances of her life and the reactions of her mind interest me. Also her devoted contentiousness with her well-off father. As far as I can gather, Daddy got his money in as conventionally a rascally way as you got yours."

"So many rogues in the world——" She laughed. "But is that all the attraction Vera has for you?"

"She is pleasing in bed," he said.

She took out a cigarette from the packet on the jaunty lacquered coffee table and, as though she were on a balcony or pier contemplating a holiday sea, looked into vacancy. A male guest crossed from the staircase and determinedly went out to examine the town's evening resources. She shifted her chair and re-settled herself. Her face had the look of someone obliged to accept a deduction in logic. Megan, the frosty maid-of-all-jobs, glanced in from the service door and pursed Methodist lips at sight of Val. He had had his hair cut that morning and, in some odd way, looked returned to a self discarded on grounds of principles for which he had been ready to go to the stake. Perhaps this was only due to his new clothes. Eva had 'lent' him money for the tweed coat and pale whipcord trousers.

In a reflective way. she said: "You are pleasing there yourself. At least, you were with me."

"I do not wish to steal your laurels," he granted in turn, enjoyably on his high horse again. "The poetry is yours. You taught me how to appreciate the common art of folk lore, the balladry of the flesh. You made a man of me. I've told Vera all this."

She lost calm at last. *"What!"*

"In the interests of truth."

"Vera doesn't mind?" Even her voice seemed to have gone pale.

"She regrets it. But Vera's been so battered by herself that her first thought is for a personal ointment, an aid to wounded vanity." He waved the cigar. "Vera's a liar. She can cower. A liar to

others and to herself. A small instance—she told me she'd been driving cars all her life and had a bad smash once, but a chap in the local garage who's teaching her now and known her for years told me it's nonsense. She must have known I'd find out; she's indifferent to opinion. She also told me she fell down a mountain quarry as a child and broke her leg, and had been in a train accident."

"An attraction to disaster," Eva remarked, not looking at him. She sat back recovered.

"No; a loneliness. Worsened by the identification—what you would call 'in love'—with the young man who decamped . . . Vera," he concluded, shaking ash into the palm tub beside his chair, "is a fighter. But she rolls her R's too much."

"She'll need to be a fighter," Eva murmured.

He looked musingly at the glowing cigar end. "She made a great fuss. I did battle with the young man who ran away, really."

"I found her reasonably normal when you brought her to tea last Sunday."

"Who wouldn't be normal at Sunday tea in your sister's home?" He looked at the electric clock clamped like a petrified starfish to the mottled wall. "Blessings on neurotics and abnormals. . . . Now, darling, about the house you offered to buy me when we sat in the cemetery by your old lover's tomb, on condition I get out of your life. Look, isn't this a more decent way?—suppress your cruelty and give me only a thousand pounds in cash, as a private wedding present to me if I marry your fellow-townswoman. Jackie's house off Fulham Road would cost more than a thousand. If I tell

Noah P. I've got a thousand of family money he'll be impressed."

"And Vera?"

"Leave Vera to me."

"The alternative to not giving you a thousand pounds?"

"Why, none, of course. I must just plough my lonely furrow as best I can."

Her flight to Bylau had really achieved something, then—had really struck? She said, slowly: "If I gave you anything at all, it would be five hundred pounds."

"That is why I asked a thousand," he laughed.

"I didn't say I was *giving* you the house. I think I meant it still to be part of my capital. I wanted you to have the security of a home, ready furnished in a tasteful way."

"You would have come to tea once a month? Oh, Eva, you're adorable. So worried! . . . It would not have worked."

"This, here in Bylau, will?" she asked, still far away. For some reason, memory of the dead Elwyn returned to her again, and all the young seemed stricken with problems, with moon-white faces, dotty ideas, febrile energies, braced shoulders that could suddenly become forlorn, intrinsically orphan for all their impudences. She pulled herself from this, unwillingly.

"Who can tell whether it will work here?" He stretched across the table and patted her hand. "Have I paralysed you?—you look in a stupor."

"It's all been so rapid——" she began.

"Your caution is period old bonnet, darling, and dates you. Since man took to the air everything

has been speeded up, including the processes of what you call love." He also pointed out: "As you know, I haven't much respect for money, not even yours—perhaps especially not yours. Couldn't you make it seven hundred and fifty pounds?"

"If anything at all, five hundred," she said sombrely. "I'll decide this week."

He finished his second whisky. "You almost make me wish for a belief in love. Then I could say I love you. If I say I would like to take you upstairs now would it be enough?"

"Much less than enough. I must bear my fate with patience. I loved you. Aren't you going to have another whisky?"

"Vera's late." He looked at the clock and fetched another drink from the desolate cocktail bar serviced by elderly Mrs. Bertha Jones, who sat knitting. When he came back she announced she would give him a cheque for five hundred pounds on the day he married Vera. "I haven't proposed to her yet," he remarked, "or she to me. It might take weeks yet."

"You must speed up! If you haven't done it in a month I'm backing out." She sat back again, passive.

"I wonder would she elope with me to London? It'll all be easier there. We could go on to Paris. If Iolo is still living there he could give her a trouncing. . . . But I do like this Bylau. I feel rested here. It's good for my nerves. . . . Here she is." His eyes had constantly strayed to the exit to the street.

Vera came through the swing doors carrying a long wicker basket which displayed lettuces,

cucumbers, beetroot, and two public library books. Her gait and bearing, even her proud ox-coloured hair, suggested that if the basket had been borne on her head she would still have seemed pleasing, a young goddess coming from a field of abundant green things. "Hello," she said in her throat, and as though taken by surprise. "I've been to Willie Morgan's nurseries. His stuff is cheaper than the shops." She swallowed like a person suppressing choleric feelings.

"Have a drink?" Val asked, pulling another chair to the puce table. He went to get cider for her at the bar.

"Linda asked me to tell you," Eva said, "that the Guild is organising a garden party in June, and would you come to the meeting on Friday?"

"Friday night is a busy night here," Vera grumbled, tossing back her hair. "I thought I had resigned from the Guild." She concentrated. "I don't like the president, Mrs. Anchor-Jones; she's dictatorial. All those pearls." Her eyes avoided Eva, who was wearing a string of good pearls, and when Val came with the cider she glanced at him half averted too, her finely cut lids lowered.

"We've been waiting for you," he accused.

"Why?"

He looked at the clock. "A drink at eight, wasn't it?" He sat down. "However, Eva and I have been going into business. I put her on to a property deal in London and she thinks I ought to get seven hundred and fifty pounds as my share."

Eva took out a handkerchief and shed an excellent odour. "I said five hundred."

Vera looked at last at Eva, as from a lioness's den.

"A large tip!" she remarked, generally. "Ten per cent, or what? You must be rich, Eva."

"I'm reasonably well-off," Eva said calmly. "The deal, though, is not completed yet. . . . How are your driving lessons proceeding, Vera?"

"It's not the first time I've driven. I had a smash three years ago."

"I thought it was five years." Val made no attempt to conceal his wink at Eva. "We all get smashings-up of some sort," he added. "We like to draw attention to ourselves. The week after my mother died I told my father the police had picked me up as a suspected runaway from a reform home and beaten me up at the station. The old devil did nothing to verify it. A day or two later I actually did steal a card of six collar-studs in a cheap store."

Vera became alert. "You weren't caught?"

"I held the card plainly in my hand as I walked out, but no one was interested."

Without moving, Vera seemed to lean towards him, either in protection or entreaty. Her physical handsomeness was so obvious that it seemed like a loud protest for recognition, generating dynamic power despite her look of isolation: it also suggested a peril of self-punishment. She could develop an interior heaviness, she was rooted too deeply in earth. Pessimism came from her, but not scepticism.

Megan flapped across the lounge, ducked under the palm fronds, said beakily to Val: "Wanted on the phone," and flapped off like an affronted parrot.

"It's a chap I met in a billiard saloon this morning." Val rose to go. "Wants me to go to whippet races with him on Saturday. He breeds them."

Whippets! In a month he would be breeding

them himself. Eva laughed good-humouredly. Vera called Megan back to give her the basket of vegetables. The maid gone, she said: "Why are we sitting here? It's for the bloody customers. Daddy even wanted to call it the Palm Court—ugh! We'll go up to my room. . . . Did you see Daddy tonight before he went to the council chambers?" she asked abruptly.

"No." Eva collected her things to go.

"He talked about you after you came here last week. The old days in Bylau and the famous Mr. Dai." Her tone, conferring prestige on Eva with the uncalculating homage of the young, rid this of malice.

Eva had known her father only in the casual home-town way in which many young men were known to her. He had been slightly older than herself. "I used to see him about the place," she said.

"He said you were the reigning beauty and didn't know it."

"We didn't have reigning beauties in those days. We only had a body for the home and a soul for the chapel."

"I can't believe you grew up in Bylau," Vera said, apparently meaning to give further homage. "This way. Val will know where we are."

Eva suspected she had arranged with him to leave them alone when an opportunity arose. They went upstairs, through the capacious room reserved for receptions, club meetings and choir practices, and climbed another hulking great staircase to the top floor. Vera's room there was bright with chintz-covered chairs and a divan, bowls of flowers, prints of well-known French paintings: on a table were a

paint-box, jar of brushes, a sketch book, and two apples on a plate. "I do water-colours," she said forbiddingly. "Val says they're very bad."

"If they give you peace——" Eva sat in a large easy chair. The immediate atmosphere in the room did not bode for peace. Vera strode about, jerked the window curtains closer, frowned at a Provençal landscape, went to the table and flicked over the pages of the sketch book.

"You and Val," she said, not hurriedly but still in a pressed-for-time way, "you have an . . . understanding." Her cheeks seemed to bleed with rawness. "You don't mind my knowing?"

"No. I want him to finish with me." She clung to her passivity as to a raft.

"Sometimes I think he's a ruffian, sometimes full of sense. . . . Besides his looks!" she added morosely. "I could deal with him better if he was plain."

"Don't ask me for information or advice, Vera. Why not allow yourself to fall in love with him if that is what you want?"

Vera threw the sketch book on the floor. "What have you done to him?" Yet the fury remained caged.

"Educated him, I hope. As he has educated me."

Vera's voice became more stressed. "He's not . . . *clean*! Damn you! Why haven't I met him before? We could have made our mistakes together. He's so bloody sure of himself." Kicking the sketch-book across the floor, she then gave vent to a string of oaths, public bar expletives which in her mouth escaped impurity, as in a young trooper letting loose against oppression in a barrack room. She

picked up the sketch-book and laid it on the table with a gentle regret.

"Not clean, Vera?" Eva waited, but there was no reply, and, as though it involved the whole race of man, continued: "Oh, well, it's a big subject."

"Now you are giving him money!"

"Which he's told you about."

Vera threw herself into the other easy chair across the square of carpet, and a well-kept, steady finger traced the flower on the chintz. "It's impossible!" she said. "You want him to finish with you, but how do I know he won't go back to you?"

"I don't want him. He knows that."

Vera eyed her, but without resentment. "You're an advanced woman. You've led a strange life, haven't you?"

"Advanced?" She shied away warily from the word. "I admit to a liking for men. I've loved some, in a way. Most of all I loved a young man here in Bylau. He died. I loved Mr. Dai in a different way. He was well-off and left me money."

"You keep so controlled!" The prolonged examination of Vera's eye was not embarrassing; its curiosity held tribute. "Have men given you that?"

Eva allowed herself a smile. "Well, not Val." She added: "If you are attracted to him, Vera, your instinct is right. Give way to it."

"References!" It sounded like a jeer.

"He'll keep you alive," Eva said, unruffled.

"Unfaithfulness can keep one alive all right," Vera glowered.

"That is your business. It won't be mine."

"A fellow let me down," Vera said, with forthright suddenness. "I was madly in love with him."

"Nobody is ever let down in that. We only make mistakes. The fellow didn't want you sufficiently."

"You think I'm conceited, do you?"

"Yes. You mistake it for pride. You've got the conceit often found in an only child. I should think your father has spoilt you from ignorant good nature and because he deprived you of your mother by divorcing her. As for young men, you would frighten a good many of them, though not Val. . . . Vera, you need to enjoy things more. You are beautiful to look at, though not—at present—beautiful of nature. But you ought to get rid of some of that hair. Val himself told me it was too violent when he first saw you, buying chops down the road. And stop scowling at life."

Vera seemed to accept it all. She said: "The hairdresser here has got fishy hands. He lost sixty pounds on the whippet races last month. I should have to make an appointment in Cardiff. Now we've got a car——" She looked at her nails. "I take care of my hands myself." She looked up, glowing. "You dress well, and it's not only money."

"Shall we take a day's shopping trip soon?"

"It's not easy to get entertaining clothes down here. A pheasant's feather stuck in a hat is as far as they'll go in saying hell to you. But will you really come with me?"

Eva began again. "Even a pheasant's feather is better than bad language——"

They were absorbed in the subject of clothes when Val walked in. "Daddy's back," he told Vera. "I've been having a whisky with him." Eva laughed outright. His air was ridiculously casual. "Eva," he said, while Vera pursed her lips, "when

Daddy knew you were here, he said: 'Bring the girl to the parlour before she goes.' " He grinned. "You're still the paragon of Bylau's young ladies for him. Preserved in aspic." He squatted on the floor against Eva's chair. The glint in his eye might have been from the whisky; or from something else.

Vera got up from the easy chair at the carpet's far end, began her prowling again, took an ordinary hard chair from against the wall to the table, and sat there playing with a piece of green string. "Daddy wants to travel," she said, in an over-composed way. "A boyhood pal of his, Luke Pardoe, is always writing to him from America, asking him to make the trip. I wish he'd go. First thing I would do is clear out all those palms—you have to wash the leaves," she addressed Eva rigidly. Her voice became outraged. "He ordered two hundred pots of them! He's got no shame. I wish he'd go to America. But he thinks Bylau District Council can't get on without him. 'What if Royalty comes down?' he said to me. 'Since the factory estate's got so important it's on the cards.' " She seemed not to notice Val lolling against Eva's chair. "He won't rest until Bylau is made a borough, with him as Mayor. It's gone to his head. I often wonder if he's got too big for his shoes."

"It will be a dull world when obsessions stop going to men's heads." Val looked up at Eva, lifted a hand to stroke her cheek, and added: "Won't it, darling?"

Remembering that he had once contemplated taking a job in the Nightshade Club, Eva said stolidly: "Why don't you ask Vera's father to find you a job here?"

"Have you two been planning my future?" He looked at Vera with a calculating malignancy.

Vera did a finger trick with the string. "Eva's been giving you good references."

He bent his head and kissed Eva's silk-covered knee, declaring: "She should know. Loyalty, honesty, diligence *and* patience."

"We want workers in this hotel," Vera stated, realism in the thrust of her not-to-be-deceived staff manageress bosom. "Sometimes we are so busy that we call in a couple of postmen to help in the evening. Ten shillings and free beer. . . . Would that suit you?" she demanded of Val.

He eased up a little from the floor and indolently laid his head in Eva's lap, face upwards, looking at her. "Everything that lives is holy," he murmured.

"Am I in the way?" Vera demanded.

"Not for me," Eva said. "He's saying good-bye to me. You must admit he's doing it nicely."

Vera threw down the string and looked at them with a full astonished gaze. "I can't understand it. It doesn't seem *right*. The difference in your ages!"

"You must try and make it seem right for you." Val's voice came from Eva's lap with a placating tone and a languor not characteristic of him. "I enjoy women. But only one at a time, on the whole. It does seem to be a law," he said, regretfully. "Two by two they went into the Ark . . . complaining, I expect. Are you listening, Vera? Eva wants my interest in her to finish; she is of your opinion—that it doesn't seem right. Probably she's wise. I've got to admit to other views than my own." He raised his head slowly, withdrawing his

gaze from Eva's face; he looked across the room at Vera. Now she sat turning over the pages of the sketch-book, burnished head bent. "I wish I could live with both of you." Still Vera did not look up or move. He said to Eva: "Vera, so far, is not so pleasing in bed as you are but, then, she's much younger."

Vera sprang up. The chair fell backwards to the floor. "I won't stand it!" she shouted. She hesitated, stood glowering, and turned aside from sight of them.

Val's voice held a preoccupied surprise. "Would you prefer I lied to you, as you lie to yourself?"

She did not reply. Eva said: "They like to have their exhibitions, Vera. You'll find such things boring eventually—except when they're satisfying. . . . After all, we've got them, haven't we? Few of them can do without us. He's quite silly, this boy." She thrust him away sharply, with her knee. "Get up." She all but growled.

But he lay full length on the carpet and held out his arms. "Come here, Vera," he called softly. "I *do* like you. You don't really mind that I want you? I knew I wanted you when I first saw you, through the window of a butcher's shop—I told Eva about you when we were in a bus going to the cemetery. You stood brooding over the meats, I stood rooted to the spot, as they say, and at that moment there was a terrific crash of an axe in the shop. . . ." He rolled back to Eva's chair and kissed her expensive shoe. Her foot shook him off. The interior shiver came out in her face like a writhing of lightning.

Vera, head down, did not turn to look at them.

Val rolled over the floor and gripped her ankles. Eva watched, remembering; she also remembered the gripping of her throat. She prepared to go. Vera stood looking down at him now. He released her ankles. For a moment Eva wondered if she'd stamp on his face. But she sat on the floor beside him, her back to Eva, and passed a finger over his lips and nose. He seemed to smile. "We'll go for that water-colour picnic tomorrow?" he said. "To the valley you spoke about."

"I said I'd go shopping with Eva."

"Go on your picnic," Eva said; "the shopping can wait."

Vera turned her head. "Won't you come to the picnic?"

"My time for such picnics is over."

"Says you!" Val gurgled from the floor. "Hasn't Vera got *surly* ear-lobes! Cover your lobes with precious stones, Vera. Oh, I do like wealthy women. Also, with reservations, poor ones. I must get you to realise yourself properly, Vera. . . . Don't go yet, Eva——"

But she had slipped out. The wrench was only moderate compared to the greater one already achieved. As she went downstairs a brittle exhaustion possessed her. Down in the empty ground-floor lounge she hesitated, decided she did not want to see Noah P. tonight, and made her way to the swing doors. But Noah stood outside on the steps, talking to a man who carried a silver trumpet which glittered so brightly that obviously it was new.

"Eva!" Noah took the cigar from his mouth. "Not going, are you?" He held her elbow. "See

that trumpet? For the Bylau Town Band that's holding its jubilee concert in June. Cost twenty quid. A present from yours truly. . . . Right-o, Watkins!" The man, too proud of the trumpet to conceal it in a case, went away in the direction of the Institute. "Got to keep the electors pleased, Eva," Noah whispered. "When is your name going back on the roll?" He had the diction of a man who has sung strenuously in choirs.

Resolutely crossing the lounge with him, she remembered the deputation from the original Band coming to see Mr. Dai at one of his six o'clock audiences for the people of Bylau. They went into Noah's parlour through a door heavily concealed behind a whole bower of palms and marked *Strictly Private*. "Where's those two?" Noah asked, not removing the pale grey homburg which his head was seldom seen without.

"Upstairs, I think." Noah asked her what she would like to drink and when she said brandy he wanted to know if she 'had a heart'. She said it was sound. 'Strike while the iron is hot,' she was telling herself.

Even the parlour had a palm. It was really his office, with a roll-top desk and a plaster statuette nationalistically advertising whisky. The brass fender and fire-irons were brilliantly polished, the leather armchair smelt of an old kitchen dog which padded censoriously about the hotel at intervals. Noah pressed a bell, Megan appeared, and brought brandy and soda. Noah already had his private bottle of whisky on the desk. He sat there on a swivel chair eyeing her in a judicial off-and-on manner. His linen was fresh, and he had a con-

spicuously vain little habit of displaying hands which were as well-manicured as his daughter's. A gold ring encircled his necktie.

"Well, those two, Eva," he began again, when they were settled with the drinks. "Who's this little b—— from London? A tongue as long as my arm. I had the chief constable, T. D. Prosser, here the other night and this Val What's-his-name had a go at him. All about England being allowed to go to pot. T.D. said to me afterwards: 'I like that bloke, but I bet I'll be seeing him one day on the wrong side of my desk.' "

"Oh, Val is harmless. The sort that climbs a church tower to hang what the papers call a bedroom article on the spire. He needs home life." It was the best she could do at the moment. The fugitive anguish still threatened, approaching, retreating.

"Tells me he's in the commercial art line. Are they taking him on in one of the factories—Philip giving him a job?"

"Not as far as I know. I think Val is exploring here, though."

"Don't hum-and-haw with me, Eva. Vera's gone on him."

She plunged. "Well, don't try to prevent it; Vera might run off with him if you do. He won't mind living in poverty with her in London. His sort have a knack with poverty. He's not really after money; but if it's there he expects his share—spitting at it at the same time." She felt she was rallying somewhat, but sat back wondering if there would be a more personally crucial examination.

"There's money enough. But I don't want it

going on horses and dogs and trips to Monte Carlo."

"Would it upset your life if Vera ran away with him?"

He blinked, pausing. "She's been a handful. Ran away once before and took a job as a nursemaid—*my* daughter!" He pouted. "My life or the hotel wouldn't fall down."

"A lover will bring out the best in her, Noah." Her voice became brisk, business-like. This was a woman seeing beyond all the nonsense of the flesh, but also acknowledging the flower in its season.

"You should know, Eva."

She looked up from her glass and saw that he meant her own life generally. It would not occur to him that Val had been her lover. She hesitated, and decided not to tell him; that was Vera's business if she chose.

"I should know?" she smiled.

"Come now, Eva." And he beamed at her.

Here it was again! But Noah had something like a family right. Outside, the streets of her childhood, changed though they were, spread like dwellings rising above a native harbour welcoming a much-buffeted boat. She sat thinking of her meeting with Noah a few days ago—how he had brought back flavours of the old Bylau days. Now those days, for all their drama, seemed cool and serene. Their texture was in this man. His musical voice unsealed little stoppers of memory. There was about him even a gritty aroma of coal brought up fresh from the pits in trucks like a load of black cauliflowers.

"This is good brandy," she hedged. She was

enjoying the drink. Or was it because of the role she thought she was playing so well?

"Do you ever think of Mr. Dai now?" Noah asked, mildly curious of voice as a gentleman should be.

"The morning after I arrived here this trip I went up to Bryn Hyfryd with flowers for his grave."

"Good gal! You always were good to him, everybody said that. He was a good man too. The place began to go downhill after he died—or he died just in time to escape the real coal troubles—anyhow, I remember the average man-shift went down from eighteen hundredweight to about eight." He continued to muse. "You went with the hey-day. I remember seeing you about the town looking tip-top as if you sang 'Hark, Hark the Lark' every morning. Us young chaps used to say things about you that would make you blush, my gal! Wishing we were in Mr. Dai's shoes, of course!"

"Do you remember that after I laid one of the foundation-stones of the Institute someone chalked a word above my name in the night?"

"Oh, well." His cigar waved the word away. "There were some funny characters in Bylau in those days."

"I knew only two men in Bylau—Mr. Dai and a boy who died."

"You've kept considerably fresh, Eva," he veered. "People would say you'd have gone to pieces, wouldn't they?"

"Perhaps I did go to pieces," she said darkly, her brandy finished.

He chuckled, with the mature charity of a magistrate not at present sitting on the bench. "Not you,

Eva! You're tough as one of my old barrels in the cellar." He pressed the bell with a look of approval, and Megan appeared and returned, bringing another brandy. Pouring himself more whisky, he resumed: "Everybody thought you would go on the stage when you went away from Bylau."

"Mr. Dai left me well off." She paused and said reflectively: "I lived on my means."

The swivel chair creaked as he leant back. "They're not all gone?" he asked with a business-man's disturbed alertness. He eyed her again, nostrils quivering like feelers. "No. You wouldn't be looking so independent and comfortable."

"I've got safe investments and I've been dealing in property. Young Val helped me a bit. He's got a quick and active mind."

"A bit of a secretary, eh? Oh, well . . . Quick all right, I should say. I've had them up before me many a time, and *that* slows their pace for a while." He pouted.

"Val's got views——" she began, and made effort to try and remember them. "All of us are absurd to him, including himself—the whole world, I mean, as it is to-day. . . . But he's loyal," she rambled on. "Loyal and genuine."

"Vera wants a young man, but I'm damned if I'm going to buy her one, Eva."

She shook her head and renewed the effort. "You've got hold of the wrong end of the stick, Noah. They no longer believe in proving their worth. They believe *we* are worthless, having allowed the world to become what it is. They're proud and contemptuous——"

"Pah," he spat. "Do they think we *want* disasters and wars and inflations—set out for them deliberately?"

"No. They don't *blame* us. But they don't see why we should expect respect from them. . . . What they're not," she said, "is humbugs. And they despise money as a . . . a religion. They use money only because they've got to have it for a shirt or a slice of veal-pie."

"That chap likes his whisky," Noah pronounced, adding: "There's plenty of poor girls down at the Bwlch that ought to suit him just as well, with his views."

"Val respects and is fond of Vera," she insisted. "Vera is attracted to him. It has happened."

"What has?" he asked suspiciously.

"Why, Romeo has met Juliet." She managed to smile. "It'll be good for the uncertainty he feels," she began yet again, only pausing to admire the way in which she controlled the urgency devouring her. "He'll get to love the world through Vera," she proceeded, now engrossed in her own volubility. "I wanted to protect him in some way, give him something to hold on to . . . and I know what I'm about with men," she tacked on, with sudden ruthlessness.

Noah's fist banged the chair arm—was it with enjoyment too? "You want to marry him off down here? Eva, Eva—not a son of yours, is he?"

She reared up, too extravagantly. "Certainly not. At one time he wanted a love affair with me."

"Well, indeed! The little villain! . . . Reminds me of a young fellow I had up before me from the Bwlch. He wouldn't keep off Miss Stott, the

headmistress of the school, following her about, writing letters—all very well, except that one night he broke into the cottage where she lived alone."

Eva looked down her nose with the extreme frigidity which required colossal effort in her, so that she almost became cross-eyed. "He must have been looking for security too," she observed in a blank way. "A headmistress would seem to have that."

Noah, musing, remarked: "They seldom look ashamed now, true enough. . . . They put the wind up me sometimes," he said, oddly out of key.

She finished the second brandy, looked round for her handbag, and said: "I've known several men since I left Bylau."

He strengthened the whisky and soda remaining in his glass, but did not offer her any more brandy. "I dare say, Eva. You've got it about you."

"Got what?" she demanded, subduing the belligerence.

"Experience, I would call it, my gal." He removed the dove-grey homburg at last and carefully placed it on a pile of accounts lying on the desk. "A lot of value in experience, providing it doesn't corrupt." The agate eyes, resting on her ponderingly, held not only the blur of maturity but wonder.

She stretched to put her glass on the mantelpiece. "I've never taken to drink, at least. I've had these couple of brandies because I've had a trying time lately."

"I dare say," he said absently, pondering on her.

"It's all over now." She thought he was about to

ask her if she had any experience in running hotels, and she got up with decision.

"You don't want to go yet?" he protested.

"Yes. What a pretty Toby jug!" She pointed at the awful piece of pottery on the mantelpiece. It was then that Vera came in, a moment or two after the first closing-time bells had sounded in the bars. Her entry was business-like.

"Alec Williams is troublesome in the saloon again," she said to her father. "Drunk as an owl and refusing to go." She glanced aside at Eva, with a smile.

"Fetch him here. I'll handle him." He said to Eva: "Alec's been like that ever since he lost his boy with meningitis." She went to the door with Vera. "Bring Phil and your sister down to supper on Sunday, Eva?"

"I'll ask them and ring you," she said.

As they crossed the lounge together, Vera said tentatively: "Val went to the kitchen to get a sandwich. Do you want to see him?" A few people sat about under the palms for the last sad drinks. Megan stood with folded arms waiting for everybody to stop enjoying themselves before she banged the wicker chairs up on the puce tables. The final closing bells sounded. It was the low hour of ten-thirty.

"No. I expect I'll be seeing you both on Sunday, with Phil and Linda. Good night, Vera." She walked quickly, energy renewed, to the swing doors.

Outside, men oozed from the doorways of the three class-graded bars in clamorous despair and conferred knottily on the pavement. Otherwise the street was empty. Ten thousand more or less law-

abiding houses were settling into the restful night. The policeman testing the locks of shop doors glanced at Eva; she hurried in recognition of the rule that in such a town as Bylau no self-respecting woman loiters at such an hour. Outside the railway station, where the last train was due, a luxurious limousine waited, at the wheel a beautifully made-up girl, glossy in the austere modern style—who was she? The new factories had brought mysteriously alien elements into the town. Some girl friend of a director?

To reach the Common it was not necessary to make the detour into the gaslit side street in which the Institute stood. She paused a moment before the building, all flying buttresses, Gothic windows and beetling gables. She only wanted a glimpse of her foundation-stone embedded low in the wall under the billiard—or was it the reading?—room windows. Her name was still there. Blurred but decipherable. She returned quickly to the main street. The hey-day of Bylau! Why should she think of those tangerines now? One day she complained to Mr. Dai that no tangerines—she had developed a craving for them—could be found in Bylau. A whole case of them, containing hundreds, were delivered to her next day. If the boiling Socialists of the time had got hold of that! Each tangerine would have become a bomb. The word above her name on the stone had been scrawled in red chalk.

Walking, more slowly now, up the side street leading to the Common, she became aware of footsteps hurrying behind her. She looked back, and waited. It was Val, of course.

"Why did you run off?" he panted. "Walking home all alone!"

"Why not? You ought to have brought Vera for a walk."

"She's busy counting the evening's takings for the safe. I thought of you crossing that sinister Common——"

The night was peaceably still. On the edge of the Common she asked, detachedly: "Did you come to a further understanding with her?"

"She asked me if I would marry her providing—and she put it exactly like this—I proved suitable for her after further contact with me. The cheek of women with money or expectations of it—though there are exceptions. I gave her contact all right! What an offensive word to use! She had a talking-to that made those ear-lobes tingle. Of course, most of my battle is with the young man who ran away from her. I'm paying for that cur."

Her voice was patient. "Vera sat meek under it all?"

"She pretended to be shocked: I actually was shocked."

"Val, you're a bore with your cock-of-the-walk showing-off. I thought I had helped you—I told Vera I had educated you: a bit of conceit on my part, I suppose. One can't help the young." She trod the short springy grass with pleasure. "Anyhow, Vera is your contemporary, you'll help each other." She listened to herself. "You'll probably be able to stop that lying of hers. But take care how you behave. Or she'll tuck away a pile of resentments on the quiet, all ready for the big day."

He peered at her in the purple light. "You

haven't been drinking with old Noah in the parlour, have you? You sound as though you're a hundred miles away—*and* years."

"I had two rather small brandies. We talked of the old days in Bylau. I've just been to see the foundation stone I laid at the Institute." She concluded: "I'm under the influence of something else."

"Dreaming of being Mayoress of Bylau?"

"That will do, Val," she said, frowning.

He began to walk with a little leap. The high air was invigorating. "Odd that we two should be here." He gazed round the rough stretch with its clump of bushes, shadowed bandstand, trios and couples of lithe birches. As far as could be seen, no one else seemed to be enjoying the open parkland air. "A long way from The Goat in Boots, Iolo's room, and your discreet flat."

"Not a long way for me." He might have been any escort; she still walked enclosed in contemplation. "It's all linked up."

"I would have said you had broken all links."

"Does one ever?" She pointed down towards the huddled clusters of streets on her right. "My first love lived down there."

"And where will your last be, I wonder?"

"On this Common at this moment."

He peered at her again. "This sentimentality doesn't belong to you, Eva. Besides, have you a right to it?"

"I don't know, Val. But I've got it."

"I told you in the cemetery that day it was a mistake to return here. You will be a bore soon, sitting about going to rack and ruin. Nobody more depress-

ing, darling, than a light o' love taking the illogical path." He kept on glancing at her sideways.

"You work things out only in your mind——"

"I! I've always considered myself ninety per cent healthy animal."

"If you like. With an animal's small range."

"I walk here astounded!" he exclaimed.

They were passing a bench placed beneath three silver birches. "Let's sit a moment," she suggested, and when they were settled, said: "Look, I'll give you seven hundred and fifty pounds whether you marry Vera or not."

"I am glad there are no conditions, Eva." He stretched a leg and held it up. "Do you like these new shoes I bought in Bylau? I hanker for my sandals, but Vera——"

"Do you know why I've giving you this sum—no, how should you?"

"Because I need money, I suppose."

"I'm giving it you as a memorial to my first real love."

No exclamations of mockery, ridicule or repudiation of the sentiment came from him. Only the reply: "Seven hundred and fifty seems so quibbling. A thousand is more dignified, surely?"

"If you don't take care it will be five hundred," she threatened.

"Oh, all right, all right. Don't start bustling again." Hands clasped on the bench edge, he swung his legs, apparently reflecting. She took out her cigarette case. After a moment he asked: "Did this young man mean so much to you?"

"He died," she replied; "that's all."

"Were you seeing him in me all the time?"

After a pause, she said warily: "I didn't think of it like that. Perhaps it became that." He took the lit cigarette from her lips and put it in his own. She lit another for herself.

"The ghost that returned!" he said. "Somehow it's insulting to me."

"You were a good lover." She might have been complimenting a gardener on his flowers.

"Well, I don't want your money. I can marry Vera just as I am, see! She'll get round her father all right. I'll learn the hotel trade."

"I would like you to have the money, Val. But certainly not a thousand pounds."

He plucked the cigarette from her lips, threw his own to the ground, and gripped her at the shoulders, pushing her down. Her head banged against the arm-rest end of the bench. The attack displayed a brilliance of supple movement, there on the awkward bench, his arms and legs squirming with octopus agility. Yet she did not lose control of the situation; momentarily she was bothered only by recollection of the two occasions when, as if playfully, he had gripped her throat. The struggle lasted a minute or so. A wave of disgust, clear and sturdy, rose in her and gave her extra physical strength. He fell to the ground on his back. He did not get up. The disgust became tumultuous. At last! Sitting up and re-arranging her clothes, a hand instinctively verified that her pearls were still intactly round her throat.

"Why don't you get up?" She was annoyed that her voice gurgled. "You haven't broken anything?" She could see the gleam of his eyes through the darkness. He did not get up but lay looking at her

as she peered down. "Get up, Val." She patted the bench-space beside her. "Come." She picked up her handbag, which had fallen under the bench, and took out the cigarette case again. She rubbed the back of her head.

He did not get up. But he said: "Broken anything?—yes. *You.*"

She tossed him a cigarette, followed by her lighter. He always liked lying on his back. "Well, I've recovered," she replied. "If you touched me again I think I'd be sick."

He lit the cigarette. "I'm trying to believe it."

"It's the physical result of too much mental torment, Val. But I want to leave you remembering what a wonderful lover you were."

"You liked me?" He sounded remote.

"There you go again—like, *liked*! I loved you."

He blew out a thick cloud of smoke, expanding his chest as though lying in idle luxury on the hard ground. "You know," he said musingly, "I rescued you. And just in time. I broke up your pattern. Your life was becoming horrible. I got your mind going. I won't speak of your heart, it's an organ I don't much trust—hearts in general, I mean. It required someone like me to break you up, someone who could speak a lot of your language. A so-called good, morally conventional man couldn't have done it."

"Perhaps you are right, Val." She thought he was right, but said: "I remember you suggesting I harass or blackmail my nice gentlemen friends. Was that a rescue too?"

"Yes. You would have reached self-horror

quicker. Besides shaking them up . . . *I* would make you sick, indeed!"

"You see yourself as a saintly saviour?" But she couldn't keep the tenderness out of her voice.

"On the whole I think I've earned my seven hundred and fifty pounds. Especially if you marry Noah P." He stretched an arm and gripped her ankle. "Are you going to be sick?"

She shook herself free. "No." She got up. "At least we would be keeping everything in the same family. If I married Noah P. I think I could handle the situation—now. Good night, Val." And, rapidly, she walked away. He remained on the ground. At the entrance to the dark scrubby lane descending to the house which Mr. Dai had given her she hesitated, but did not look back. In the lane her pace slackened. But the exhaustion was pleasant. She would sleep well tonight. Perhaps Val was exhausted too and needed his rest on the ground. The bitter struggle was over.